From Death to Life

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From Death to Life

Key Themes in Plato's Phaedo

By

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Introduction

1 Why Publish This Book?

In an important contribution dating back to the 1990s, Nicholas Smith raised a question I deem crucial for understanding and justifying our work as historians of ancient philosophy:

> How on earth could there be anything more to say about philosophers who have been studied ceaselessly for nearly two and a half millennia?[1]

The question is relevant from both a theoretical and practical point of view. Scholarly research, precisely inasmuch as it is a kind of 'research' has the institutional task of 'seeking' and 'finding' something that was not there before, or of highlighting something that no one has yet seen (or clearly noticed). In other words, the notion of 'research' seems to be strictly dependent on that of 'novelty'. And it is precisely for this reason that the question raised by Smith (which in the course of his essay he defines as "The Inevitable Question")[2] arises spontaneously. Is there anything new to be found by working again and again on texts already read and studied thousands of times over the centuries? And, above all, how are we to justify the costs that this kind of research entails (lower than the costs of research in the "hard sciences", yet still significant) to an increasingly perplexed public opinion?

This second question loses much of its provocative edge if we recognise the usefulness and opportuneness of keeping 'research' alive even in the Humanities, even if no practical results are to be expected: in that case, the money required (if only to pay researchers' salaries) is well spent.

However, the question should at least have the effect of orienting research in the Humanities towards the discovery of something that is truly new. And given that research in this field, and particularly research on the history of philosophy, has above all (albeit not exclusively) written texts as its object, the "novelty" in question here can hardly consist in anything other than a new interpretation of the texts themselves, aimed at highlighting new meanings, which previously had not been grasped (or had been grasped only partially).

We here come to the answers that Smith suggests for 'The Inevitable Question'. First of all, this scholar continues, there is what he calls "The Easy Answer":

1 Smith 1992, p. 245.
2 Ibid.

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004538245_002

> The easiest answer to this question scholars can offer to non-scholars is to say that each generation of scholars must reinterpret the Greeks in terms that are accessible to their own generation, and hence, that our discoveries are often simply discoveries of ways to make yet another generation appreciate the wisdom of the ancients.[3]

However, according to Smith, this answer is not entirely satisfactory:

> The problem is that even if The Easy Answer should turn out to be true, it is not (or not usually) what scholars think they are doing when they work. Scholars generally think they are discovering - or at least are attempting to discover - some truth or truths about the text, truth or truths their scholarly predecessors to some degree or other failed to see clearly. Scholars who believe this are thus realists about the interpretations they offer: they regard their results as succeeding only in so far as they describe some objective state of affairs or states of affairs the way things really are (or were) in regard to the texts the scholars seek to explain. But, more importantly, they are also progressivists about scholarship - in contrast to those who might accept The Easy Answer to the Inevitable Question, scholars typically think that we make progress, from generation to generation, in our understandings of ancient texts. Accordingly, I shall call this 'The Progressivist Answer' to The Inevitable Question: we are still somehow making progress in coming to understand the ancient texts, understanding them in ways which are somehow demonstrably superior to the ways our predecessors understood them.[4]

In the remainder of his essay Smith provides some interesting arguments in relation to this second answer, but I will not take them into consideration here. I just wish to say that, in my opinion, his position is the correct one: the only really fitting answer to The Inevitable Question is a "progressive realism" which takes texts as a concrete object of research, and aims to improve our knowledge of them through a better understanding of what they say and of the authors' intentions in writing them. The fact that a researcher should always strive to find something new should simply be a given, analytically stemming from the very nature of the profession he exercises.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case (rather, it is increasingly less so). When, many years ago, I read Gregory Vlastos' *Socrates*, I came across an

3 Ibid.
4 Smith 1992, pp. 245–246.

absolutely delightful sentence, which has stuck in my memory ever since. Vlastos tells us that in 1953, during a sabbatical, he left a work on Plato halfway, to devote the whole year to Socratic dialogues. However, he continues:

> I was determined to finish for a somewhat ridiculous reason: so I could win at last (I was then in mid-career) that sine qua non of respectability in American academia, a book-length work between hard covers.[5]

Vlastos actually managed to complete the book. But he had the honesty to read it again from beginning to end, and then sincerely to conclude that it was wrong. He decided, accordingly, not to do anything with it. Unfortunately, this rarely happens. Vlastos undoubtedly showed great intellectual honesty. But it must also be said that he could afford to do so, since he already held an academic position. The situation is different with scholars at the beginning of their careers, who have a vital need to publish articles and books in a short time, in order to be able to access academics posts. The outcome of this state of affairs, owing to the constraints imposed by the PhD (an established convention that I continue to consider detrimental, although it has now become a must in all countries of the world), is that the correct order of things has been completely overturned: instead of writing and publishing because they have something to say, scholars are looking for anything to say because they need to write and publish. This, frankly speaking, seems abnormal to me. If a researcher has noticed that what he has written says nothing new, he should do as Vlastos did, and forgo publication. And if, worse still, he realises that he does not have enough creativeness to produce original works, he ought to conclude that he has got the wrong job: why waste time, energy, and money that would be much better spent by devoting oneself to more fruitful endeavours?

If we add to the PhD the various other 'sources' of occasional writings that are in place today (from calls for papers to conferences and collective volumes), it is easy to understand why the bulk of secondary literature in the history of ancient philosophy has now become unmanageable, even if we keep exclusively to English-written works. And here, again, the consequences are harmful. Those who limit themselves to writing in order to produce "a book-length work between hard covers", without aiming to say something original, do not need to carefully check the secondary literature. For their purpose it is sufficient to cite the written works of the best-established scholars in a superficial and generic fashion. In this way, books and articles take on the appearance of

5 Vlastos 1991, pp. 1–2.

what Vlastos has called academic “respectability”. Those who intend to propose something new, on the other hand, must check everything carefully, because they cannot know in advance where the things most interesting to them are to be found (well-argued alternative theses, anticipations of their own position, implicit objections to which they must answer, etc.). Unfortunately, however, this research is made intolerably long precisely because of the presence, in the literature, of a lot of writings that do not have the ambition to be original, but only to create a product that can be evaluated on the academic market: a product whose nature is not clearly predictable in advance (if not in certain specific cases).

What has just been said suggests a further remark. If it is true, as Smith contends, that the right answer to the question about the aim of the research in the Humanities is ‘The Progressivist Answer’, it is necessary for researchers to first investigate the state of the art in full: for otherwise it is obviously impossible for them to decide whether, and to what extent, their contribution is really an improvement. In this regard, I wish to recall what Francisco Gonzalez observed, quite a few years ago:

> I sadly perceive [there] to be a growing insularity in Platonic studies, especially among English-speaking scholars. Extremely helpful and worthy work is ignored simply because it is not in the right language or school.[6]

The remarks made so far explain why I have decided to publish this collection. On the one hand, each of the essays featured here provides some interpretations that in the present writer’s view contain some innovative elements – naturally, it will be up to the reader to confirm or disprove this assessment. On the other hand, all nine chapters are based on contributions that were originally published in Italian, and which have therefore enjoyed limited circulation (for the aforementioned reasons). What I am presenting here, however, is not simply an English translation of these texts, since they have been updated and radically changed, often through the addition of extensive new sections. The two ends of the spectrum are Chapter 9, which has been rewritten in full, and Chapter 6, which has been kept quite close to the original version (for reasons I will be outlining).[7] The various theses I uphold, each of which is intended

6 Gonzalez 1998, p. IX.

7 I here provide a list of correspondences: Ch. 1: Fedone *65a–68c: possibilità e limiti della filosofia*, in L. Cardullo – D. Iozzia (eds.), ΚΑΛΛΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΡΕΤΗ, *Bellezza e Virtù. Studi in onore di Maria Barbanti*, Bonanno, Catania 2015, pp. 191–204; Ch. 2: *Fedone 62a 2–7*, in “Acme” 46 (1993), pp. 73–80; Ch. 3: *Si può parlare di “unità” della psicologia platonica? Esame di un caso*

to offer an original perspective with respect to the reference literature, have remained largely the same.

There is one last preliminary point I wish to make. Although the main focus of this book is obviously the *Phaedo*, I have often developed my analysis through the support of other dialogues. This choice reflects the adoption on my part of an intermediate position between the idea that each dialogue must be interpreted independently and the view that Plato's philosophy is a compact and coherent system in every respect, and hence that it is possible to pass from one dialogue to the next without too much concern for the thematic, stylistic, and structural differences between them. I believe that Plato's corpus is marked by an underlying coherence, which is not undermined by the aforementioned differences or by assumptions about its evolution.[8] Nevertheless, I envisage this hypothetical coherence not as the starting point of our enquiry – as though it were an already established fact – but rather as the ideal outcome that we should reach in our interpretation (clearly, to the extent that this is possible).

2 Detailed Synopsis of the Book

2.1 *Chapter 1, "Death"*

In the first part of the dialogue, to justify the favourable attitude which the true philosopher has to adopt in the face of death, Socrates explains to his friends that it is only after death – if at all – that the philosopher can achieve the objective to which he has devoted his entire life, namely the attainment of knowledge of the Forms. Scholars have mostly viewed this argument with suspicion, because it seems to imply that for Plato the ultimate goal of philosophy is not achievable, with consequences of a sceptical nature that are incompatible with the overall meaning of Platonic thought. An accurate analysis of the text,

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significativo (Fedone, 68b–69e), in M. Migliori – L. Napolitano Valditara – A. Fermani (eds.), *Interiorità e anima. La* psychè *in Platone*, Milano 2007, pp. 307–320; Ch. 4: *Socrate, Antistene e Platone sull'uso dei piaceri*, in L. Rossetti – A. Stavru (ed.) *Socratica 2005, Studi sulla letteratura socratica antica*, Levante, Bari 2008, pp. 235–261; Ch. 5: Platone, *Fedone*, Einaudi, Torino pp. XXXIV–XLVIII; Ch. 6: *La teoria dell'anima-armonia nel* Fedone, "Elenchos" 9 (1988), pp. 53–74; Ch. 7: *Cause formali e cause finali nel* Fedone, in L. Palumbo (ed.), λόγον διδόναι. *La filosofia come esercizio del render ragione. Studi in onore di Giovanni Casertano*, Loffredo, Napoli 2012, pp. 435–449; Ch. 8: *La "prima navigazione" nel* Fedone, in G. Cornelli – Th. Robinson – F. Bravo (eds.), *Plato's* Phaedo, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2019, pp. 344–352; Ch. 9: *A proposito di un passo di Platone* (Fedone 104b–105d), "Acme" 38 (1985), pp. 131–145.

8 Cf. Trabattoni 2013 (A).

centred in particular on the repeated use of the verb "to possess" (*ktaomai*), shows that Plato is very careful to assign full knowledge of Forms only to the disembodied soul; but this does not exclude the possibility that approximate, fallible, and circumstantial knowledge of them is possible for man even in his present life. This outcome cannot be reconciled with Plato's overall philosophical attitude only if one adopts a rigid and dogmatic interpretation of it. But this interpretation actually finds no confirmation in the texts. As correctly recognised by the interpretative approach which can be summarised by the expression "third way", Platonic epistemology has neither a dogmatic nor a sceptical character, but stands halfway between these two extremes.

2.2 *Chapter 2, 'Suicide'*

While claiming that the true philosopher is eager to die, Socrates denies that suicide is lawful. Cebes manifests an understandable surprise towards such a ban, which seems to contradict the premise. In responding to his interlocutor, Socrates explains Cebes' surprise with a brief speech of rather difficult interpretation, and with regard to which scholars have – unsurprisingly – advanced several different explanations. In this chapter I try to demonstrate that Socrates identifies two possible reasons for Cebes' surprise, and that to understand both of them it is necessary to put aside some of the modern prejudices about ethics, and to take into serious consideration the nature and consequences of the ethical eudeaimonism characteristic of Socratic-Platonic ethics.

2.3 *Chapter 3, "Virtue"*

After concluding the argument aimed at establishing that true philosophers do not care about death, Socrates rather abruptly introduces the theme of virtue. This section of the dialogue is often considered problematic, because it seems to entail a rigid distinction between "demotic" virtues (which would not be real virtues at all) and philosophical virtues, with the effect of triggering a conflict between the political orientation of the *Republic* and the ascetic orientation of the *Phaedo*. This chapter aims to demonstrate that this impression depends on an incorrect reading of both dialogues. The idea that the ascetic-contemplative attitude is in contrast with the political-active one cannot be found in Plato, where – on the contrary – the philosopher's political competence derives precisely from his contemplative attitude. According to Plato, only philosophers – which is to say, those who dedicate their entire life to knowledge of the good – actually possess the necessary tools to direct people's private and public life towards what is best. In the text at issue here, Plato rhetorically underlines this connection, which according to him is a necessary one – however surprising this may seem. He juxtaposes a passage emphasising the ascetic element to the

utmost degree (with respect not only to the *Phaedo*, but also to Plato's oeuvre as a whole) with a strong affirmation of the philosopher's ethical and political teaching. In other words, the very moment in which Plato seems to suggest that the hallmark of his philosophy is the idea of a flight from this world, he feels the need to reaffirm the necessary link between philosophy, ethics, and politics. The rhetorical effect is designed to persuade the reader that where apparently there is a contradiction, there is actually an implication.

2.4 *Chapter 4, 'The (True) Philosopher'*

For this topic too, a linguistic analysis of the text proves important and enlightening. In several passages of the dialogue, particularly (yet not exclusively) when highlighting the philosopher's attitude to death, Socrates emphasises that he is talking about the "true" philosopher, accompanying this noun with suitable adjectives and adverbs. Plato's choice of words seems to reflect a polemical desire to criticise someone – someone who probably fancied himself a philosopher but could in no way be regarded as such according to Plato. In this chapter I argue – albeit most cautiously – that Plato's main target is Antisthenes, who was no doubt his staunchest rival when it came to Socrates' philosophical legacy. In particular, Antisthenes was the fiercest opponent of Plato's way of interpreting and integrating Socrates' experience, namely as a desire to know universal and *per se* entities. As we have seen, this specific nature of philosophy is what accounts for the philosopher's confident attitude towards death. In other words, according to Plato, the true Socratic philosopher is he who has grasped – as Plato himself has – that both the theoretical and the existential dimension of Socrates' philosophy entail the metaphysical background explicated in the Platonic dialogues, namely the existence of the Forms within a separate realm, and the immortality of the soul. By contrast, as may be inferred from a passage in Xenophon's *Symposium*, Antisthenes has interpreted Socratic care of the soul as a mere prudential assessment of the relation between pleasures and pains. Antisthenes has therefore failed to pass the test which distinguishes true philosophers from false ones, namely the attitude to death, which in turn depends on the metaphysical background described in the *Phaedo*. This shortcoming is evidenced by what surviving sources tell us about Antisthenes' behaviour in the face of death, which shows his attachment to the life of the senses, in strident contrast with the serene confidence that Socrates displays before his disciples in the Platonic account.

2.5 *Chapter 5, "Recollection"*

Against a thesis upheld by many scholars (most notably, D. Scott), this chapter aims to prove that (both in the *Phaedo* and in the *Meno*) Plato does not

conceive of recollection as a research method, but rather as the metaphysical condition of possibility for philosophical research. Plato's aim is not to show that, through the alleged method of recollection, anyone can regain the knowledge of the Forms which they lost at birth; rather, his aim is to clarify that what human beings call "learning" is merely the partial reactivation of that knowledge which the soul possessed in a full and complete way in its disembodied condition. Proof of this is provided by the fact that our intellectual forms of knowledge are necessarily based on "knowledge" that cannot be the outcome of a learning process which our soul has undergone in its embodied condition (this is the case, for instance, with the possibility of recognising the rift between the imperfection of sensible forms of equality and the perfection of equality itself, despite the fact that no knowledge of the latter is available in everyday life). What necessarily follows from this experience, in Plato's view, is that such knowledge originates elsewhere. If this is the case, recollection is not a method to gain complete knowledge of the Forms available to all human beings; rather, it is a theory – known to philosophers alone – which explains certain experiences of knowledge-acquisition that are common to everyone (yet cannot be identified with knowledge of the Forms, but only with comparative operations such as that exemplified by equals in the *Phaedo*, or by the test of the slave in the *Meno*) in terms of the memory of what was already known – and not in terms of a process of learning from scratch, which would be impossible (as shown by the eristic paradox mentioned in the *Meno*). Finally, from all this it follows that recollection cannot be understood as a primitive research method, based on transient religious and eschatological assumptions, which later came to be replaced by dialectic. While this thesis is widely supported by actualising interpretations of Platonic thought, which are disinclined to take seriously into account doctrines that seem unlikely from a modern perspective, it is untenable from a historiographical standpoint. The doctrine of recollection cannot be replaced with dialectic, because the two play essentially different roles: dialectic – understood as the identification of the relations holding between universal concepts as we experience them – would not be possible without pre-existing knowledge of the universals themselves, which underpins the exercising of dialectic. The second part of this chapter focuses on the passage of the *Meno* (85c–d) which is most often invoked to show that recollection is a method for acquiring knowledge, and more specifically for leading human knowledge from the level of *doxa* to that of *episteme*. This interpretation depends, however, on an incorrect reading of the passage in question. In fact, Socrates does not say that the slave-boy, if correctly questioned, will be able to attain knowledge, as any other person can. It is no coincidence that those who interpret the passage in this way find themselves having to justify

an epistemological optimism that is anything but Platonic. What this passage actually means is that even those who have never learned geometry, like the slave-boy, if correctly questioned can find the right answers no less than those who have studied it (although it will take them more time). This shows that the true source of their knowledge is not learning, but memory. The last paragraph sets out some general considerations concerning the interpretation of recollection presented in the chapter, with particular regard to the *doxa* / *episteme* relationship.

2.6 *Chapter 6, "Harmony"*

After Socrates has attempted to prove the immortality of the soul with specific arguments (the so-called *antapodosis* the argument about recollection, and the one about the possible affinity between the soul and the intelligible), Simmias and Cebes raise two objections. Simmias grants that the soul is closer than the body to what is immaterial and intelligible; but he remarks that this is not enough to establish that the soul survives the body, as is shown by a comparison with a musical instrument and the harmony it produces: even though the harmony is no doubt nobler, just as the soul is nobler than the body, the harmony's existence depends on that of the instrument. If, therefore, we were to understand the soul as the harmony of the various parts of the body, it would be impossible for it to survive the body's death. Socrates, then, must refute the thesis according to which the soul is the harmony of the body. He does so through various arguments, although ancient interpreters disagree as to their exact number and nature (they list as many as five); the same uncertainty is found among modern scholars. This chapter aims to demonstrate: (1) that there are three arguments; (2) that, as may be inferred from specific clues in the text, the second and the third argument are interwoven in chiasmic fashion (a. premises to the third argument; b. premises to the second argument; c. unfolding and conclusion of the second argument; d. unfolding and conclusion of the third argument). It is an especially complex task to reconstruct the structure of the second argument. The suggestion put forward here is based on the interpretation of some difficult lines from which it may be inferred that the essential premise to understand the unfolding of the demonstration lies in the distinction between accidental predication and essential predication. In brief, Socrates argues that insofar as virtue and vice coincide with the harmony and disharmony of the soul, each soul must be more or less harmonised, since it is more or less virtuous. But if the soul were a harmony, then its being more or less harmonised would not merely affect a quality it possesses, without affecting its essence qua soul, but would rather destroy the soul as such. In other words, many things can vary with respect to their being harmonised to

a smaller or greater degree, while remaining what they are. But this does not hold if the subject that is more or less harmonised is harmony itself, for in this case we would have what Aristotle calls a "substantial change", which entails the corruption of the subject undergoing change.

2.7 *Chapter 7, "Causes"*

Introducing his response to Cebes' objection, Socrates explains that it is necessary to investigate the causes of the generation, corruption, and existence of things. The aim of this premise is clear: only if it is possible to find something incorruptible in nature, will it be possible, by somehow anchoring this reality to the soul, to show, as Cebes has asked, that the latter is indestructible. Socrates first presents his reservations about the way in which natural philosophers have addressed the problem of causes; he then outlines the so-called "second voyage" (concomitantly with the introduction of ideal entities); finally, he develops and concludes the demonstration of the immortality of the soul (the last demonstration occurring in the *Phaedo*). This section of the dialogue, which is probably the most challenging and complex from a philosophical standpoint, has been extensively studied by scholars, who have suggested a wide range of different interpretations. In this chapter I address the problem of causes; in the following chapter, that of the "second sailing"; and in the last chapter I then attempt to reconstruct the demonstration of the immortality of the soul. In Chapter 7 I endeavour to show, against the main interpretations suggested so far, that: (1) the inadequacy of physical-natural causes is due to the need to respect Parmenides' principles; (2) the explanation put forward rests on a metaphysical aim, and is in no way intended to represent the doctrine of physical causality according to Plato. According to Socrates, physical-material causes are inadequate because they can only account for quantitative changes in matter, not the appearance and vanishing of forms. For example, if we state that something small becomes large because its matter increases, this does not account for the fact that during this transition the 'form' smallness seems to vanish into nothingness, whereas the 'form' largeness seems to appears out of nothingness. But because this is impossible, we must suppose that the real causes are the forms (in the specific case at hand, the forms of largeness and smallness); and that the true cause of the becoming of a thing is its participation/non-participation in the corresponding form. Socrates can thus argue that the real cause of a thing becoming 'x' is its participation in the Form 'X'. However, it may be ruled out that the principle in question coincides with the Platonic doctrine of physical causality, as this is expounded in the *Timaeus*, not the *Phaedo*. As is clear from a passage of the dialogue, Plato is aware that the causal explanation presented in the *Phaedo* may appear particularly naive.

But its aim, I think, is not to identify the scientific causes of change. I suggest, instead, that Plato wishes to show that the Forms necessarily exist, as this in turn will allow him to demonstrate that the soul is immortal. And in order to demonstrate that the Forms exist, Socrates shows that the existence of the Forms is the metaphysical condition that makes becoming possible.

2.8 *Chapter 8, "Voyage(s)"*

Socrates states that his dissatisfaction with the naturalistic explanation led him to embark on a second sailing. This metaphor is unanimously used by Greek authors (including Plato himself in the other two dialogues featuring it, namely the *Statesman* and *Philebus*) to describe a weaker procedure, a sort of "second-best". However, within the context of the passage under investigation here, the interpretation of the metaphor seems rather problematic, because the second sailing here entails the transition from material causes to ideal ones, so it is difficult to see how this transition might be described as a second-best. The need thus emerges to discover what the first voyage consists in, which is to say the higher procedure with respect to which the second voyage represents a second-best. In this regard, scholars have suggested that the first sailing coincides with the search for final causes, which Socrates would be abandoning through the second one. But although this solution is supported by several authoritative commentators, it is untenable, because the search for final causes does not play any real role in the argument. The solution I am suggesting here, and which is confirmed by an analogy with another *Phaedo* passage (already highlighted by other scholars, albeit insufficiently), consists in positing that the first sailing is represented by the direct knowledge of objects that are perceived in the present, as in the case of sensible knowledge. In other words, in the transition from physical causes to ideal ones, Plato announces a fundamental asymmetry: whereas the search for ideal causes is superior to that for physical causes from the point of view of the object, it is inferior to it from the point of view of method, because in this case direct knowledge of the object is unavailable, and all we have is the kind of indirect knowledge developed by means of *logoi* (discourses). This is precisely the second sailing. The explanation just outlined finds confirmation in a second metaphor which Plato presents in the text, namely that of the mirrors which human beings use to observe solar eclipses: this perception is indirect, because it is mediated by the filter of mirrors, just as knowledge of the Forms is indirect, insofar as it is mediated by the filter of *logos*. The idea that *logos* means indirect knowledge is further explained by many other Platonic passages (including the parallel passage *Phd.* 85c–d): the purpose of the *logos* is to describe an object's features exactly, but its truth is never certain, because it depends on judgement, which

will either detect or not detect an exact correspondence with the reality it seeks to reveal. In other words, *logos* can never possess the unquestionable clarity of direct perception. Indeed, Plato limits the direct perception of ideal objects, and the unquestionable truth that follows from it, to the disembodied soul (doctrine of recollection). The chapter is completed by a comparison between the metaphor of the "second voyage" in the *Phaedo* and the *dianoia-noesis* relationship in the metaphor of the divided line (*Resp*. Book VI), and by an analysis of the other two passages in which the metaphor in question is mentioned (*Phil.* 19c, *Pol.* 300c)

2.9 *Chapter 9, "Life"*

The precondition for correctly reconstructing Socrates' last argument in favour of immortality is the difference between accidental predication and essential predication, which had already been partly highlighted through the refutation of the doctrine of the soul as harmony. In brief, this is how the demonstration unfolds. Universal Forms, the necessary existence of which has been demonstrated in the previous pages, can be arranged into pairs of opposites, which is to say mutually exclusive terms. Thus, for instance, hotness, evenness, and life rule out their opposites, respectively: coldness, unevenness, and death. Therefore, the Form of hotness cannot participate in the Form of coldness (and likewise in the other cases), as being cold constitutes its essence. However, Socrates observes that the same also applies to those objects for which participation in the corresponding Form entails the reception of the essential feature represented by the Form itself. For instance, while it is true that both a piece of wood and fire are hot by virtue of their participation in the Form of hotness, it is equally true that whereas the piece of wood can be either hot or cold, fire can only be hot – it can never be cold. This means that the essential predication of a given attribute concerns not just the Forms but also the objects participating in them, which find themselves in the condition just described. For example, not only can the Form of hotness never participate in the Form of coldness, insofar as it is essentially hot, but the same also holds true of fire, which is essentially hot, just like the Form of hotness. On this basis, the demonstration can swiftly be completed. As fire can never become cold, it will either perish or escape intact as coldness draws near it. The same thing holds for the pair "life/soul", insofar as neither entity can tolerate death (there cannot be a dead soul, for the same reason that there cannot be a cold fire). Therefore, as death draws near, the soul must either perish or escape intact. But in this case, according to Socrates, we do not have a real alternative, because that which can be defined as im-mortal (i.e. impervious to death) is indestructible, and hence will escape intact. However, there are three facts that make this explanation

problematic: (1) in the dialogue, Socrates also introduces the relation between a Form and its corresponding object (e.g. we find not just the pair 'Form of hotness/fire' but also the pair 'Form of fire/fire'); (2) in the passage in which this occurs (104d1–7), the interplay between neuter accusatives and nominatives makes the translation ambiguous; (3) to indicate the possession of an essential predicate, Socrates also applies to objects an expression that would only seem appropriate for the Forms. Very succinctly, then, Socrates explains that when a given Form is able to occupy a certain thing, it conveys to it not only its own Form (e.g. the Form of fire makes a given thing become 'fire'), but also a specific opposite (in this case, 'hotness'). Therefore, the opposite in question ('hotness') will be an essential characteristic not just of the Form of fire, but also of sensible fire. And if this is so, sensible fire will also be hot in an essential way. But in order to express possession of this essential quality, Socrates states that fire will have the power to heat anything it is able to possess, using exactly the same expression he employs to explain the relationship between the Form and the thing. This has been taken to suggest that the two cases are much the same, i.e. either that Plato is never referring to the Form, but only to the relationship between the things and the objects they change (as when fire heats wood, stones, and so on), or – given that in 104d6 the subject is clearly the Form – that the particular thing which is the soul is a Form (this view is upheld by O'Brien, but it seems like an unlikely interpretation).

CHAPTER 1

Death

1 Dogmatism, Scepticism, etc.

The peculiarities of Plato's work (the indirect method of communication, the author's anonymity, the variety of points of view, the presence of many apparent inconsistencies, Socratic 'scepticism', etc.) have given rise to an enormous debate, starting with the immediate reception of his thought. The first and very general question was to establish whether Plato was a 'dogmatic' or 'sceptical' thinker. While Plato's first pupils (Speusippus, Xenocrates, and Aristotle) carried on the Platonic project of discovering the first principle of reality, the Hellenistic Academy with Arcesilaus and Carneades adopted a sceptical approach, which they then corrected during the first century with Antiochus of Ascalon (who is credited with the comeback of dogmatism within the Platonic tradition) and perhaps also with his teacher Philo of Larissa (with reference to the mysterious 'Roman books' that this author is reputed to have written towards the end of his career). The Hellenistic debate is known to us above all through the works of Cicero, who in a famous passage of the *Academics* has Lucullus say that in Plato's books "nothing is stated positively and there is much arguing both pro and contra, all things are inquired and no certain statement is made."[1]

With the advent of so-called Middle Platonism and then of Neoplatonism, the dogmatic (as well as metaphysical) interpretation of Plato's thought became more and more dominant, going so far to determine (through the harmonisation of Platonism and Christianity, carried out both in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance) almost the whole subsequent reception of Plato up to the 18th century. A significant change took place at the beginning of the 19th century, through work of the German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. In the first decades of the 19th century, he translated all of Plato's writings. He prefaced his translation with a famous *Einleitung* (introduction), in which he stressed the dialogical and literary aspects of Plato's writings, underlining the need to harmonise content and form, since according to him the latter is of no less philosophical weight than the former. In particular, Schleiermacher argued that, by shaping his texts in the ways he did, Plato intended

1 *Lucullus* 46: "nihil adfirmatur et in utramque partem multa disseruntur, de ominibur quaeritur, nihil certe dicitur".

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to introduce the reader to his philosophy not by presenting his theses and the results of his research, but rather by stimulating him to take an active role:

> And to the inward and essential condition of the Platonic form belongs everything in the composition resulting from the purpose of compelling the mind of the reader to the spontaneous production of ideas.[2]

This assertion was then taken up many times by scholars, and endorsed in particular by those interpreters convinced of the non-dogmatic character of Platonic thought. But while all dogmatic interpretations converge on the idea that, through his texts, Plato delivers to the reader those theses he believes to be true and demonstrable, the anti-dogmatic side falls into two further subgroups, which we could call 'strong anti-dogmatism' (SaD) and 'weak anti-dogmatism' (WaD). Only the first version of SaD can plausibly be called 'sceptical' (although perhaps it would be better to call it 'agnostic'), as it argues that Plato's sole intent is to present various different opinions on the topics discussed, without taking any position in this regard. The proponents of the anti-dogmatic position, actually, rarely reach such radical results: indeed, this outcome would be so strong as to force us to exclude Plato from those authors having a philosophical position of their own and animated by the intent to teach it to others. More often anti-dogmatists do not exclude that Plato has a philosophical position of his own, and that his writings have the intention of communicating and (above all) teaching it. Rather, they argue that Plato intends to educate listeners and readers to adopt a specific 'dialogical' attitude, while refraining from teaching well-defined opinions or doctrines expressed through propositions.

This opens up the possibility of understanding Plato's philosophical position in the light of a 'third way', which goes beyond the traditional dichotomy between the dogmatic and the sceptical interpretation. As F. Gonzalez wrote in the collective book which in a way has marked – even in its very title – the symbolic inauguration of this perspective,

> What is required is that we keep open the possibility that Plato was neither a dogmatist seeking to establish doctrines nor a sceptic seeking to undermine them but, once again, something totally different.[3]

According to this line of thought, however, the 'third way' is not an intermediate position between scepticism and dogmatism, but a position that eliminates

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2 Schleiermacher 1836, p. 37.

3 Gonzalez 1995, pp. IX–X.

or disqualifies this dichotomy, insofar as Plato's philosophy and teaching are not primarily concerned with dogmata, i.e. with doctrines or opinions, either in a positive or in a negative sense. Gonzalez, for example, emphasises learning as the enactment and non-propositional nature of philosophical knowledge. According to G. Press, Plato's dialogues are not intended to support or teach any doctrines, but rather to foster "in the reader or audience the experience of the world as Plato envisions it".[4] The project displayed in the more recent monograph by A. K. Cotton also reflects this tendency. On the one hand, Cotton observes that "the dialogues do not contain certain views of Plato's", in the sense that "we are not in any simple way able to extract arguments from the text"[5]; on the other hand, he contends that "this does not mean that, as a sceptical interpreter might, we need to deny that the dialogues contain a movement towards determinate doctrine". This means that

> we can reject the doctrinal interpretation while still maintaining that the dialogues are committed to education; we just have to adopt a different view of what learning involves – one based on developing the learner's ability to engage in a certain way, rather than directing her towards certain views.[6]

This is not, however, the only possible way to suggest a 'third' alternative to the 'scepticism-dogmatism' opposition. According to other authors, the implausibility of the dogmatic interpretation does not imply that a non–propositionalist perspective must be adopted. Plato could be considered a non-dogmatic thinker not because his thought cannot be expounded as a collection of opinions (or *dogmata*), but because the peculiar characteristics of his writing make it very difficult both to understand what these opinions are exactly and to establish what degree of truth the author assigned to them.

According to this hypothesis, what we need to do is to analyse the dialogic structure, and to identify the philosophical propositions that stem from it, while always keeping in mind that Plato's literary choices imply a non-dogmatic attitude on his part, which somehow mitigates the truth claims of the opinions that we are entitled to attribute to him. There is nothing to suggest that Plato intended to express these opinions in a dogmatic, absolute, incontrovertible way.[7] On the contrary, the formal structures I have summarised above

4 Press 1995, p. 144.

5 Cotton 2014, p. 25.

6 Ibid., p. 26.

7 A good example of this dogmatic reading of Plato, which ascribes to him the idea that philosophy can attain incontrovertible truths, is the interpretation of Plato's epistemology proposed by Franco Ferrari. See for instance Ferrari 2007 and 2013.

(the dialogic structure, the author's anonymity, the frequent inconclusiveness of the research, the preference for the oral medium over the written one, and the leading role granted to Socrates, who is widely known for his profession of ignorance) are not enough to show that Plato did not have opinions of his own, or that he did not make use of any arguments; but they are a clear indication that these opinions are put forward by him in an approximate and questionable way – and thus are susceptible of more in-depth investigations. To put it in the words of Ch. Rowe, who recently has strongly supported a very interesting and subtle version of this 'third way':

> While he [Plato] allows that human beings, and even he, may acquire *some* knowledge ('pieces of knowledge'), he does not believe that *full* knowledge (wisdom) about the most important things – the good, the beautiful and the just, to give Socrates' usual list – is accessible to the human mind or soul. This is the basic position from which he begins, and from which he does not shift.[8]

2 Plato's 'Third Way'

Starting from my first researches on the philosophy of Plato (Trabattoni 1994), I have adopted an interpretation that can be traced back – according to the classification I have proposed above – to the 'propositional' version of the 'third way'; and I have remained faithful to this perspective until today (see especially Trabattoni 1998, 2005A, 2011, 2016, 2018, 2020). Consequently, I fully agree with the above-quoted statement by Christopher Rowe. But the reading of Plato that I propose has its own peculiar aspects, at least two of which it is important to recall here: (1) a realistic conception of Plato's metaphysics (the so-called Two Worlds Theory); (2) the incidence of epistemological problems raised by sophistry. In what follows, I will briefly summarise what I have tried to argue more fully elsewhere (see the titles just quoted).

Plato's philosophy, also – or, better, above all – because it aims to promote ethical and political ends, naturally appears to be oriented in the Parmenidean sense, that is, towards the search for a stable object and a form of wisdom corresponding to it, i.e. one separate and distinct from *doxa*. However, in my view Plato realises that the challenges posed by sophistry have made the Parmenidean ideal – according to which well-conducted research can demonstrate the full identity of being and thought – no (longer) attainable by

8 Rowe 2007, p. 37.

human beings. Protagoras has shown that *doxa* is not only the erroneous way of knowing things adopted by incompetent people in philosophy, but also, and above all, an unavoidable characteristic of the human way of thinking, which necessarily passes through speech and judgment (which according to Plato is a kind of *doxa*),[9] whatever the object it deals with. But since *doxa*, understood in this sense, introduces a subjective variable into the act of knowing that can never be nullified, it inevitably follows that truth does not impose itself on human knowledge with its peremptory evidence, as Parmenides believed, but at most can be progressively conquered in a gradual, approximate, and never complete way.[10]

The indebtedness to Gorgias is less evident, as there are no clear indications of it in the Platonic texts; however, it can be assumed by conjecture. In the treatise *On Nonbeing or On Nature* Gorgias writes:

> For what one sees, how, he asks, could one say this by a speech (logos)? Or how could that thing become clear to someone who hears, but does not see it? For just as sight does not know sounds, so too hearing does not hear colours, but sounds: and someone who speaks utters a speech, but not a colour or a thing. So what someone does not think, how can he ask for it from someone else by means of a speech, or how will he think it by means of some sign different from the thing, except, if it is a colour, by seeing it, or, if it is <a sound, by hearing it>? (83B31 D.-K. = D46 Làks-Most, from which we quote)

Regardless of whether Plato had this Gorgian passage in mind or not, it is evident in several ways from the dialogues (and in particular from the *Phaedo*, cf. Chapter 8)[11] that in his opinion full and complete knowledge of an object only occurs when between the knowing subject and the object of knowing there is a direct contact, achievable without the help of intermediaries (we can call this knowledge, with B. Russell, 'knowledge by acquaintance'), and in particular without the mediating intervention of *logos*: in this case instead we can speak, always according to Russell's distinction, of 'knowledge by description'. If this is true, it follows that the mediation of *logos* introduces an unavoidable weakness into the cognitive process, closely linked to the notion of *doxa* as judgment mentioned above: knowledge by description is 'true' if and only if the

9 See ch. 5, pp. 101–105; ch. 8, in part. pp. 148–151.

10 On the Protagorean flavour of the Platonic notion of *doxa*, if understood as 'belief' or 'judgement', see Trabattoni 1994, pp. 150–154 and 2020, p. 174.

11 See also, on this topic in the *Theaetetus*, Trabattoni 2022.

description is correct; but this correctness can only be assessed by the subject's judgment: thus, again, by his *doxa*, which according to Plato is fallible on its own. But if, as is the case for Plato, human beings do not have any tool superior to *logos* at their disposal to know the intelligible realities that are the object of philosophy (as is often emphasised in the dialogues), then the weaknesses identified above cannot but weigh negatively on the degree of certainty and truth that philosophical thought can achieve.

However, these difficulties are not enough, for Plato, to decree the failure of the philosophical enterprise, and therefore to identify scepticism as an inevitable outcome. Indeed, as can be seen from several passages in the dialogues, a certain knowledge of invisible and immaterial objects is already present within the acts by which human beings know reality, both external and internal. Here we encounter the intermediate way between scepticism and dogmatism mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: knowledge of universal entities is both unavailable (as it is never complete) and available (as it is possible to know such entities in a limited and approximate way). Plato identifies the conditions of possibility, necessary and sufficient, to explain this state of affairs in metaphysical dualism and in the doctrine of recollection:[12] the prenatal and direct knowledge of Forms, which vanished at the moment of our birth, explains both why it is now impossible for us to know them in a fully and complete way and why the traces of this knowledge are not completely lost: they are preserved in the soul in the form of faded memories, which can be partially and progressively rescued.

The *Phaedo* is the dialogue in which the framework I have just described is expounded by Plato in its clearest and most complete form. Indeed, both the epistemological point of view (the intermediate nature of philosophical knowledge) and its metaphysical presuppositions (ontological dualism, the Two Worlds Theory, recollection, the immortality of the soul) are found and carefully argued. A first notable passage where this perspective emerges is the section of the *Phaedo* which this chapter deals with. This path is further explored through the steps that we will be taking into consideration in Chapters 5, 7, and 8.

3 Philosophy or Religion?

> For if it is impossible to have pure knowledge of anything when we are in the company of the body, then either knowledge cannot be acquired

12 Cf. Gallop 1975, p. 133.

> anywhere, or it can be acquired when we are dead. For then the soul will be alone by itself apart from the body, whereas before then it will not. (66e4–6)[13]

These words uttered by Socrates in the first part of the *Phaedo* clearly enunciate what appears to be a fatal principle as regards the practicability of philosophy, understood in Platonic terms – assuming, of course, that in this case too the character Socrates is expounding theses that are at least close to Plato's. According to Plato, philosophy is the desire to know. Yet this is not a generic desire (or at least a generalisable one, as it is for Aristotle): for it is the desire to specifically know given objects. These objects correspond to what can be known *katharos* (καθαρῶς), which is to say in its purity – hence, not sensible things, but intelligible entities, which are always invariably that which they are, with no differences, distinctions, becoming, etc. Clearly, it is possible to call these things 'Ideas' or 'Forms'.[14] But, here and in many other similar cases, there is one good reason to avoid doing so: it might suggest that in Plato there is a somehow ready-made and codified 'theory of Ideas/Forms', to which this and other analogous passages allude. In actual fact, even admitting there is such a thing as a 'theory of Forms' in Plato,[15] this would merely be a scholastic and doctrinal outcome of the Platonic belief that in nature there exist qualities free of all traces of impurity,[16] and that such qualities are the object of the philosopher's desire for knowledge.

Be that as it may, the passage just quoted suggests that the object of philosophical research is unknowable to man in his mortal condition. Hence,

13 εἰ γὰρ μὴ οἷόν τε μετὰ τοῦ σώματος μηδὲν καθαρῶς γνῶναι, δυοῖν θάτερον, ἢ οὐδαμοῦ ἔστιν κτήσασθαι τὸ εἰδέναι ἢ τελευτήσασιν: τότε γὰρ αὐτὴ καθ᾽ αὑτὴν ἡ ψυχὴ ἔσται χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος, πρότερον δ᾽ οὔ. Here, and below, I use A. Long translation (Sedley-Long 2010).

14 In this book will use these two terms interchangeably.

15 Gonzalez 2003.

16 The standard definition regularly employed by Plato to indicate entities of such a kind is merely negative, as in *Phaedo* 79d6: "those entities stay always in the same state and condition" (ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὡσαύτως ἔχει). Long's translation, however, fails to grasp the difference between ἀεὶ and κατὰ ταὐτὰ: ἀεὶ points out that the entities at issue here are unchanging from a diachronic perspective, while κατὰ ταὐτὰ refers to synchronic relations: for instance, while the sensible object "a" can be "x" and "non-x" at the same time (cf. *Parm.* 128e–130), the universal property "a" cannot (it is nothing but "a"). They are the same qualifiers Aristotle attaches to his "principle of non-contradiction" in *Met.* Γ 1005b19–20. See also *Resp.* 479a2 ((ἰδέαν) ἀεὶ μὲν κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὡσαύτως ἔχουσαν), 478e7–8 (ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὡσαύτως ὄντα) *Soph.* 248a12 (ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὡσαύτως ἔχειν) 249b12 (τὸ κατὰ ταὐτὰ καὶ ὡσαύτως καὶ περὶ τὸ αὐτὸ), *Pol.* 269d5 (τὸ κατὰ ταὐτὰ καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχειν ἀεὶ καὶ ταὐτὸν), *Phil.* 59c4 (τὰ ἀεὶ κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ ὡσαύτως ἀμεικτότατα ἔχοντα), 61e3 (μήτε γιγνόμενα μήτε ἀπολλύμενα, κατὰ ταὐτὰ δὲ καὶ ὡσαύτως ὄντα ἀεί).

we may conclude that philosophy is an ineffective and useless pursuit. The mushroom-lover who combs the woods in search of his forage has the concrete hope (or rather certainty) that sooner or later he will find what he is looking for, without having to wait until after his death. The same applies to many other sorts of 'lovers' and researchers. The philosopher alone would find himself in a truly grotesque situation: as long as he is a man made up of body and soul, he cannot attain anything he desires; after his death, assuming he is allowed to satisfy his desire, he will no longer be a man,[17] but will be reduced to pure soul. Therefore, if there is no other object worth knowing outside the reality that is purely what it is, and if human beings can only get to know this reality after death, then there is no middle term between ignorance – to which all human beings made up of body and soul are subject, including philosophers – and wisdom, which is instead the prerogative of the gods and of disembodied souls.[18] If this is the case, everything would appear to confirm the popular stereotypes about the uselessness of philosophy and the ineptitude of philosophers (which Plato himself recalls in several passages).[19]

It is quite evident, then, why a plethora of 'Platonic' philosophers, commentators, and critics, from Antiquity down to the present day, have done their best to banish this spectre. Obviously, I cannot draw up a list of them here.[20] By way of example, I will only mention two widely adopted strategies: a general strategy and a more specific one. From a general perspective, interpreters have stressed the underlying consolatory purpose of the *Phaedo* and its emphasis on ascetic and otherworldly themes (which in other dialogues are less prominent or even completely glossed over). To this end, a number of things tend to be underlined: the differences between the doctrine of knowledge presented in the *Phaedo* and the epistemological sections of the *Republic* or *Sophist*, the fact that in Plato's mature works recollection does not appear to play

17 On this topic see Annas 1999, pp. 52–71.

18 Cf. Lys. 218a, *Symp*. 204a, *Phaedr*. 278d.

19 See e.g. *Phaed.* 64ab, *Resp.* 473e–474a, 487a–e, *Theaet.* 173c–175b.

20 A very common approach is to ignore this step or minimise its scope. In Gallop's commentary, which is as rich as is it well-known, this section of the dialogue has gone completely unnoticed. It is understandable, in fact, that it could cause considerable embarrassment to those who believe that ideas are "posed as objects of scientific knowledge" (Gallop 1975, p. 95). Nothing is said about it even in Bostock 1986, pp. 21–30, and Rowe 1993, p. 143. Pakaluk 2003, which nevertheless analyzes this section of the *Phaedo* in depth, does not give much importance to this passage. In general, the line mainly adopted by interpreters consists in noting the uniquely clear-cut way in which this text separates soul and body, and then in either underlining or minimising the contrast with other Platonic writings (see e.g. Hackforth 1972, pp. 48–51), yet without drawing the important consequences that derive from this separation on the epistemological level.

an essential role, etc. In brief, the point these interpreters seek to make is that the principle according to which knowledge of the Forms can only be attained after death must not be understood as a genuine Platonic doctrine, but only as a rhetorical move inherent to the particular nature of the *Phaedo* and to the 'consolatory' aim which this dialogue seeks to achieve.[21] From a more specific standpoint (possibly connected to the general one), the hypothesis is put forward that the increased emphasis on the soul/body rift has a paradigmatic and – so to speak – metaphorical character. The claim that it is only possible to know the Forms after death would be a sort of hyperbole used to demonstrate that the more we succeed in detaching ourselves from the senses and from everything corporeal, the more we get to know the Ideas. According to this view, Plato does not truly intend to allude to a genuine condition of knowledge only accessible to the disembodied soul; rather, Plato would be arguing that the Forms are known through the intellect and not the senses. Hence, this condition would be already fully attainable by man in his mortal state, whereas the allusion to life after death would merely be a kind of hyperbole lacking any concrete effectiveness: in other words, Plato would not be saying that we must await death in order to know the Forms, but would rather be showing how man must act in order to know them already during his lifetime.

This second observation, namely that Socrates is providing some useful advice for us to attain philosophical knowledge as far as this is possible, is perfectly acceptable – not least because Plato himself very clearly states it in several sections of the dialogue. Consider, for instance, what Socrates says a few pages before the lines I have quoted. If we wish to know that which is most true (ἀληθέστατον) in things, it is obvious that

> So wouldn't the man who did this most purely be one who so far as possible used his thought in its own right to access each reality, neither adducing the evidence of his sight in his thinking nor bringing any other sense at all along with his reasoning, but using his thought alone by itself and unalloyed, and so attempting to hunt down each real thing alone by itself and unalloyed, separated as far as possible from eyes and ears and virtually from his entire body, for the reason that the body disturbs his soul and, whenever it associates with it, doesn't let it acquire truth and wisdom? Isn't this, Simmias, the man who will hit upon reality, if anyone will? (65e6–66a8)

21 The number of scholars reading the *Phaedo* in this way, against the standard "metaphysical" interpretation of it, has become increasingly high. Among the most recent ones, see Bailey 2018, Sebell 2015, Casertano 2015, Stern 1993, and Burger 1984.

There is no doubt that here Socrates is describing “a manner of living”, or more precisely “a way of life as indicative of one who has gotten in touch with philosophy in the right way.”[22] But is that all? The idea that detaching oneself from bodily needs as far as possible is an effective means to attain philosophical knowledge in this life (so far as this is possible) is far from incompatible with the idea that complete attainment of such knowledge – which for the moment is always necessarily partial – is only possible after death. However, quite recently, authoritative attempts have been made to show that in the *Phaedo* the two ideas are actually in contrast. I am referring, in particular, to the thesis put forward by Th. Ebert in several of his works (and later taken up by several other scholars).[23] According to this thesis, Plato is consciously seeking in his dialogue to contrast the ineffective religious and Pythagorean Socrates of the first part of the text with the dialectical and argumentatively rigorous Socrates of the second part (the break between the two would be marked by Simmias' and Cebes' objections). According to a more nuanced version of this approach, in this passage of the *Phaedo*, we find at least

> two valences of purification … a demotic account represented by the various mythic and religious traditions about the afterlife, and a philosophic account that presents purification as a this-worldly intellectual endeavour capable of freeing one from the fear of death.[24]

However, such a distinction between a ‘religious’ and a ‘philosophical’ perspective, no matter if Plato approves of both (Brill) or only of the latter, has no grounds in Plato's texts: it seems chiefly based on modern prejudices about what is worthy or unworthy of a philosopher.[25] It is true that in the *Phaedo* Plato is critical of Pythagoreanism, as countless clues suggest.[26] But there is no reason to believe that this criticism extends to doctrines such as that of

22 Brill 2013, p. 23.

23 Ebert 1994, 2001, 2004, Havliček 2001, Špinka 2001, Miles 2001, Rashed 2009.

24 Brill 2013, p. 32.

25 See Centrone 2007, p. 38; Peterson 2011, p. 6: “The conception of the philosopher in the *Phaedo* is unworkable for anyone living an ordinary life. And even first-year undergraduates who are convinced of their souls' immortality for reasons of their own find the *Phaedo's* arguments for the immortality of the soul to be foolish”. But there are also scholars who do not refrain from ascribing to Plato theories or arguments which they hold to be senseless as a matter of fact. See for instance Barnes 1995, pp. xv–xv: “Plato's philosophical views are mostly false, and for the most part they are evidently false; his arguments are mostly bad, and for the most part they are evidently bad”. *Contra*, see Ebrey 2017, pp. 22–23.

26 I postpone the discussion of Pythagoreanism in the *Phaedo* to Ch. 6.

recollection. Certainly, such theories might seem naive today, and difficult to accept. Yet the strategies adopted to excise them from Plato's philosophy are far more convoluted, and exegetically uneconomical, than those which suggest that we accept them as part of Plato's thought as they are. Nor is it worth taking into account the perspectives of those who claim to be able to distinguish between what Plato wished to express through his text and what he truly thought (the most striking case being Leo Strauss). After all, both in the *Phaedo* and in other dialogues Plato clearly strives to demonstrate the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of reminiscence through rational arguments, while mythical and religious considerations seem to play only an ancillary role. But it is not just a matter of fact. Even if one believes that Plato introduces the condition of the disembodied soul mostly as a model that should be imitated, as far as possible, in the present life, it is clear that if this model did not exist, it could not perform the task attributed to it. In other words, the other-worldly and this-worldly perspectives are not only incompatible, but are closely related, as the former is the condition of possibility of the latter.[27]

4 Immortality

The point I have been trying to make is that there are no compelling reasons to remove the Platonic seal from the ascetic topics that fill the first part of the *Phaedo* – or indeed to call into question the hypothesis that knowledge of the Forms can only be attained after the separation of body and soul. The second step is to prove that this state of affairs is not only possible, but required by the overall meaning of the dialogue, which would otherwise be altered and obscured. When reading a Platonic dialogue – but the same applies to the vast majority of literary texts, particularly Classical ones – the reader wishing to understand what he is dealing with is bound to ask himself what the dialogue in question is intended to prove. If we subject the *Phaedo* to this kind of analysis, we come across an important piece of evidence in the very first pages of the text, where Socrates – urged on by his interlocutors – admits that he must present his friends with a sort of "second defence speech"

27 As Noburo Notomi has rightly pointed out: "The main arguments for the immortal soul and the transcendent forms are … inseparable from the portrayal of Socrates as the idea philosopher" and "psychological and metaphysical claims are (not) reducible to ethical ones" (Notomi 2013, p. 59).

(after the one given at his trial).[28] In brief, the problem is this: Plato's Socrates has always professed an essentially eudaimonistic[29] ethic, which is to say one based on the idea of an inextricable connection between virtue and happiness. But his looming death seems to seriously undermine this relation, and to confirm Callicles' baleful prophecies in the *Gorgias* (485e–486a). In other words, it seems to refute Socrates' optimistic assertion in the *Apology* (41c9–d2) that "no evil can come to a good man either in life or after death".[30] If, therefore, we grant that in writing the *Phaedo* Plato aimed to present the picture of a Socrates who successfully defends himself, then the idea that the philosopher can only attain the happiness to which he aspires (namely, knowledge of intelligible realities) after death is an integral and crucial part of the dialogue's theoretical plan. If, on the contrary, in alluding to otherworldly happiness, Plato were only metaphorically referring to the need to investigate things in their purity, by stripping both the subject and the object of any contamination with matter, then Socrates could hardly be able to persuade his friends of the convergence of virtue and happiness. In order for him to do so, he would have to state – quite plausibly – that he expects to be rewarded for his virtue after death. Perhaps someone might still insist that this is ultimately a literary device, or a fine tale that Plato spins without really believing it. This is quite possible, of course. But we can only engage with Plato's thought through his texts, which means that we cannot appreciate the possible divergences between the two. So, I prefer to refrain from such attempts, and to keep to what actually appears to be the meaning of the text: the hypothesis that full knowledge of the Forms is only attainable after death is crucial in order for the arguments put forward in the first part of the dialogue to make any real sense.

5 Between Science and Ignorance

But if this is the case, we are again faced with the difficult problem raised at the beginning: if the only reality truly worth knowing, namely the world of eternally stable objects, is inaccessible to man's understanding in his mortal

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28 "This part of the dialogue, sometimes called 'Socrates' defence' (63b–69e), rarely receives serious philosophical examination" (Notomi, ibid.).

29 This term is widely employed by scholars. Cf. e.g. Chappell 2014, p. 201.

30 Tr. Fowler. "Part of what Plato wishes to show in the *Phaedo* is that the philosopher's happiness should be proof against his own death and against the death of friends, or in other words that neither loosing friends to death nor loosing friends (and the other good things of life) in death should cause the philosopher grief" (Long 2013, p. 65).

condition, are we not to conclude that philosophy – understood as the love of wisdom – is a futile and inconclusive pursuit? And will the philosopher not seem like a film enthusiast who has never watched a movie, or like a bibliophile who does not own a single book? Actually, as I will now endeavour to show, this fear is quite unjustified, for it stems from an unfounded tendency to frame Platonic epistemology within misleadingly exclusive oppositions. To confirm this, let us return to the passage we originally set out from. Here Socrates does not claim that it is entirely impossible to know the Ideas before the separation of body and soul; rather, he states that in this condition it is impossible to *possess* such knowledge (κτήσασθαι τὸ εἰδέναι). My hypothesis is that this verb, κτάομαι (to possess), was not chosen at random, but in order to give the reader some essential information as to the meaning of this entire section of the dialogue.

If the soul, in its embodied condition, were incapable of knowing the Forms, then – as already anticipated – philosophy would risk turning into a meaningless pursuit; and the ultimate meaning of Platonism could be encapsulated in a highly rigid interpretation of the assimilation to God discussed in the *Theaetetus* (and which later became a key word in much of Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism): the present life is worthless, and the only aim which the philosopher must pursue is to transfer his soul from the world 'over here' to that 'over there' as soon as possible. On the other hand, it is quite certain that, according to Plato, the soul does not possess any complete knowledge of the Ideas in this life. Therefore, it is necessary to identify an intermediate path (which over the course of the dialogue is eminently represented by the doctrine of recollection), whereby there exists a transcendent reality in which the soul used to dwell prior to its embodiment and to which it will return – upon fulfilment of certain conditions – after its death. From a strictly anthropological standpoint, this means that although it can be partly fulfilled in the present life, the love of wisdom can only reach complete fulfilment – with the attainment of *eudaimonia* – in the disembodied soul, when it turns into a stable and lasting possession. This perspective kills two birds with one stone: it preserves the validity of μελήτη θανάτου (practice for death) without making philosophy insignificant.

Against this solution, it could be objected that we cannot expect much from Plato's specific choice of words, given his notorious disregard for linguistic constancy.[31] In the specific case under scrutiny, however, this argument does not

31 I am referring to the fact that Plato does not always employ the same terms to denote the same things: consider, for instance, the interchangeability between *phronesis* and *sophia* (see *Euthyd.* 278e–281a) or *idea* and *eidos*. However, we also find more explicit statements, such as *Phaedo* 100d4–8 (where, with regard to "participation", we read εἴτε παρουσία εἴτε κοινωνία εἴτε ὅπη δὴ καὶ ὅπως προσγενομένη) or *Resp.* VII, 533d4–9 (where, in taking up the

work, since the *Phaedo* passages we are discussing are a striking (and hence all the more significant) exception. First of all, in just over a page (66a–67b) Plato uses the verb κτάομαι (to possess) no less than four times to refer to the full and perfect knowledge of eternal realities. Even more significantly, Socrates immediately speaks in terms of 'possession' when introducing to Simmias the whole argument he will then be developing in detail, namely that the knowledge to which the philosopher aspires is such that it can only be fully attained after death:

> What about the acquisition of wisdom itself (τὴν τῆς φρονήσεως κτῆσιν)? Is the body an impediment or not if one recruits it as a partner in one's inquiry? (65a9)

Here Socrates accurately avoids speaking of 'knowledge' in a general sense – as would be the case if he were to use individual terms like *episteme*, *sophia*, or even *phronesis* without further qualifications. Evidently, he avoids doing so because otherwise the following reasoning would be taken to show that man, in his embodied condition, does not participate in these qualities in any way. And it is obvious that even the Socrates of the *Phaedo* – i.e. that allegedly ascetic[32] Socrates whom some interpreters wish to set in contrast to the 'political' Socrates of the *Republic*[33] – could never accept a conclusion of this kind. Therefore, with the utmost accuracy, Plato writes "acquisition of wisdom". Besides, in the *Symposium* (and, in a derivative way, in the *Phaedrus* too), the possession of wisdom is what distinguishes the divine condition of the *sophos* from the human condition of the philosopher (*Symp*. 204a, *Phaedr*. 278d). Certainly, the philosopher aspires to knowledge; yet nothing prevents this aspiration from being crowned with partial and provisional satisfactions. We only need to note that these satisfactions are indeed partial ones, which do not prevent those who have attained them from continuing to aspire (or love): exactly as the possibility for a film enthusiast to watch some movies does not remove his desire to watch other ones. Conversely, every desire (for knowledge or for any other thing) is erased when the object that causes it has turned into full and complete possession. If I desire a Ferrari, once I own it, this desire will simply cease to exist. And the same applies to the possession of knowledge to

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metaphor of the line again and presenting some terminological changes in relation to the formulation of Book VI, Socrates warns that οὐ περὶ ὀνόματος ἀμφισβήτησις).

32 This term too is widely employed by scholars, particularly in relation to the *Phaedo*: see Bobonich 2002, p. 22, who speaks of "the *Phaedo*'s exaggerated asceticism", and esp. Ebrey 2017.

33 Thus Frede 1999, pp. 26–33. *Contra*, see ch. 3.

which the philosopher aspires. But it is obvious that this situation of full possession (and hence of extinction of desire) exceeds the dimension of human life, the defining feature of which is precisely the fact of aspiring to something. When the tension vanishes, this means that assimilation to God has been completed (whereas on earth such assimilation can only be achieved *so far as this is possible*),[34] and hence that man has somehow become God (or at any rate, as in the great myth of the *Phaedrus*, that he dwells with the gods). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that, fully in line with the picture just outlined, in the *Phaedo possession* of knowledge is reserved for disembodied souls.

In the first of the four passages from this section of the dialogue featuring the verb κτάομαι (to possess) in relation to knowledge of the Forms, the argument runs as follows. The body is that element of disturbance for the soul such that

> whenever it associates with it, [it] doesn't let it acquire truth and wisdom (οὐκ ἐῶντος τὴν ψυχὴν κτήσασθαι ἀλήθειαν τε καὶ φρόνησιν ὅταν κοινωνῇ). (66a5–6)

It seems to me that this passage confirms the interpretations I have proposed (namely, that Plato is tracing a kind of middle path – for man in his mortal condition – between total ignorance of the Ideas and full and complete knowledge of them). Indeed, Socrates does not state that truth and knowledge are utterly foreign to the human experience. Rather, he admits that sometimes the soul can enter into contact with them (κοινωνῇ). But he notes that this contact, when it occurs, never translates into possession (κτήσασθαι), on account of the impediment represented by the body. This obviously means that such possession is only attainable by the disembodied soul. Again, what we have is the kind of distinction between *philo-sophia* and *sophia* that is extensively illustrated in the *Symposium* (202a–204b).

The second occurrence of κτάομαι is already familiar to us, since it is found in a passage quoted at length in the previous pages. Let us consider again the most salient lines (66b5–7):

> as long as we have the body and our soul is fused with bodily evil, we'll never properly acquire what we desire (κτησόμεθα ἱκανῶς οὗ ἐπιθυμοῦμεν), namely, as we would say, the truth (τὸ ἀληθές).

34 Cf. *Theaet.* 176b1–2.

Albeit with partly different expressions (except, of course, for the key verb for this whole argument), Socrates here essentially repeats the same concept expounded in the previous passage. This time the impossibility of the soul's attaining complete and definitive knowledge of the Forms in this lifetime, on account of its union with the body, is revealed not by its lack of possession of the truth, but rather by its 'insufficient' (not ἱκανῶς) possession of it. Clearly, though, the outcome is much the same, since possession that is not complete is no possession at all; besides, partial possession coincides with the hypothetical situation described in the first passage, where it is said that we sometimes happen to attain the thing we desire, but never truly possess it. In other words, the two situations are quite similar: the kind of definitive acquisition reserved for the disembodied soul is set in contrast to an irredeemably partial form of acquisition, typical of souls living in bodies.

The third occurrence of κτάομαι (to possess) is also familiar to us, since it is found in the passage quoted at the beginning of the present chapter. This is the one passage in the text which expresses the thesis we are discussing in the most drastic and strongest terms. Socrates states: "We really have shown that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of something, we must be separated from the body and view things by themselves with the soul by itself" (66d8–e2). He then adds that "the time when we will have that which we desire and whose lovers we claim to be, namely wisdom (φρονήσεως), will be when we are dead, as the argument indicates, and not while we are alive".[35] (66e4). But there is also a third stage, presented in a rather ostentatious way as an alternative that leaves no other options:

> For if it is impossible to have pure knowledge of anything when we are in the company of the body, then either knowledge cannot be acquired anywhere, or it can be acquired when we are dead. For then the soul will be alone by itself, apart from the body, whereas before then it will not. (66e5–67a2)

35 Ebrey 2017 has rightly stressed the fact that the text is alluding to the condition of "being dead" in a philosophical sense, i.e. in relation to a level above the corporeal one, whereby the soul is capable of achieving happiness through knowledge of the Forms (see esp. p. 15). D. Russell (2005)'s thesis seems highly symptomatic in this regard: in the chapter of his book devoted to the *Phaedo* (Ch. 3, pp. 77–105) he sets out to demonstrate that in this dialogue Plato does not embrace the ascetic position, but instead regards pleasure as a "conditional good"; however, Russell never takes into account those passages from which we can infer that the philosopher can only attain knowledge (and hence happiness) after the death of his body.

In this passage, as in all others, Plato uses the verb κτάομαι to limit the scope of his claims, and to stress once more what his argument really means: he is not at all making philosophy useless, since what can be attained after death is only the full 'possession' of knowledge.

What's more, to seal the reasoning carried out a few lines later, Socrates picks up the same topic again, using almost the same words (with what is practically a literal reference to 66b):

> 'Then,' said Socrates, 'if all this is true, my friend, for someone who reaches the place to which I am journeying there is every hope that there, if anywhere, he will properly acquire (ἱκανῶς […] κτήσασθαι), that for the sake of which we have worked hard in our past life'. (67b7–10)

As in 66b, Socrates here speaks of an inadequate kind of possession, and it is at this level that the comparison occurs: he does not wish to claim that embodied souls do not possess any knowledge at all, but only that the afterlife is where they have better chances of attaining it (the chances being slimmer elsewhere). The theme of 'good hope' is instead reminiscent of 66d–e, which also advances the hypothesis ("either knowledge cannot be acquired anywhere, or it can be acquired when we are dead") that man can never possess knowledge. Indeed, throughout this reasoning (and in the *Phaedo* more generally),[36] Socrates never appears to believe that the philosopher has any *certainty* that his soul, once correctly purified, will attain wisdom. On the contrary, he sets out from the assumption that, from a general perspective, this attainment is never guaranteed. The philosopher is well aware of the fact that he is setting out in search of something which might not exist, or might be unattainable. And if he embarks on such a quest anyway, sacrificing those bodily goods which in the worst possible scenario would in any case be the only 'goods' that exist, it is because the disproportion between the real (corporeal) good and the hypothetical (ideal) good is truly huge. Indeed, if the hypothetical good is the only good which truly ensures happiness, ultimately real goods are no goods at all. And if the hypothetical good does not exist, then, strictly speaking, happiness is unattainable – even though, according to the perspective which Socrates adopts in the *Apology*,[37] there is a consolation prize, namely the subordinate happiness that can be attained by devoting one's life to research, even if this research does not lead to any outcome (as in the famous poem *Ithaca* by Greek poet Kavafis, the voyage makes up for the non-existence of the destination).

36 Cf. *Phaedo* 107b. See the note *ad loc.* in Trabattoni 2011, with further references.

37 Cf. 38a5–6, 41bc.

These reflections allow us to rule out a hypothesis that is sometimes put forward in order to justify the limits that Plato sets to knowledge (in passages such as the ones we have just discussed), without having to abandon the idea that philosophy can in any case attain some certainties. To achieve their goal, interpreters have attributed to Plato what was later to become Descartes' view: the limitation concerns the quantity, not quality, of knowledge; therefore, although man knows infinitely fewer things than God, there are some things with regard to which man possesses a certainty that is qualitatively identical to divine certainty. However, while this interpretation is well suited to a philosopher whose main aim is to achieve, step by step, a scientific understanding of the world, it is far less suited to Plato. For Plato, the field of philosophical knowledge is not neatly divided between the things we know, the things we do not know, and those which we can hope to know (and possibly the things which we will never know). On the contrary, for Plato the whole object of philosophical research, which has a separate and transcendent nature, is always at least partially exposed to the risk of being 'non-existent' or unknowable. In other words, while on the one hand it is quite possible (or indeed rather likely for Plato) that the knowledge which the soul already has in this life is a partial reflection of the perfect knowledge which the soul possesses before its embodiment, and therefore that there exists a dimension in which this knowledge can be completely retrieved, it is equally true that this hypothesis can never be demonstrated in a full and definitive way. No Idea is entirely known in this world; hence, at the moment we do not "possess" the truth (a word which crops up again and again in the passages we are discussing), which means that we do not have any certainty. All we have is a fair hope that such certainty will be attained by the disembodied soul, when it will be able to behold the truth (66d). Therefore, as Socrates puts it, one of the two must follow: either man will never attain any certainty; or there exists a dimension in which everything will be clear, certain, and definitive. A third case, to wit the existence of a dimension in which there is partially certain and partially uncertain knowledge, is ruled out by Plato.

6 Conclusion

In the previous pages I have developed my argument chiefly by stressing the importance of the use of the verb κτάομαι (four occurrences) and of the noun κτῆσις (one occurrence). I will now set out to provide an overall analysis of the section under scrutiny, in order to suggest that both its general structure and other important linguistic clues confirm the interpretation I have suggested.

As we have seen, the beginning (marked by one of the transition formulas most commonly employed by Plato, namely τί δέ)[38] raises the problem of the possession of wisdom (65a9). A few lines later this condition of possession is identified with that which might come about, should the soul grasp the truth (ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς ἀληθείας ἅπτεται, 65b9). After 'possession' and 'wisdom', 'truth' is the third key word that helps make sense of this section of the dialogue. It is worth noting, however, that up until this point Socrates' discourse has no specific ontological determination: he is speaking of wisdom and truth from a generic standpoint, and even his mention of the soul (in the sentence just quoted) does not carry any metaphysical significance: it more or less means what we would call 'mind'. Therefore, up until this point there is nothing to justify the philosopher's μελήτη θανάτου (practice of death). The metaphysical turn occurs precisely at lines 65d3–4, and is significantly marked – once again – by the transition formula τί δέ (this is an indeterminate question, which corresponds to the Latin *quid enim?*). Here, by posing a question about existence of the sort typical of the Platonic Socrates,[39] the latter asks Simmias if there exists anything just in itself (δίκαιον αὐτό) – and then anything beautiful and good in itself. In my view, it would be otiose to enquire if we are already dealing with the 'Platonic Forms' here or not. All that Socrates wishes to say – as the following lines clarify – is that if such things exist, the senses cannot perceive them; and that, if we not only believe that they exist, but also grant that the philosopher's desire for knowledge has such things as its object, this necessarily leads to the outcome we are already aware of, i.e. one of the two must follow: either these things are not known at all, or they are only known after death. So, the 'Platonic' Ideas, conceived as entities transcending sensible experience, are not the starting point of Plato's reasoning. Rather, the starting point is the hypothesis that universals exist; but Plato will only show that these universals are a separate object of knowledge for the soul later on (through the doctrine of recollection). Indeed, later in the text Cebes will remark that despite what Socrates has stated (namely, that man has no access to knowledge of true reality in his embodied life), the whole argument will remain dead letter until the soul has been proven to be immortal (69e–70b).

But let us return to our section. Having established that universal qualities truly exist as self-standing entities, Socrates moves on to identify such qualities with the reality (οὐσίας) of each existing thing; and this reality is, in turn,

38 Cf. the three occurrences of this expression in the *Phaedo*, within the context of Socrates' response to Simmias (92e4, 93a11, and 94b4), which mark well-defined breaks in the argument. See below, ch. 6, p. 110.

39 See Trabattoni 2016, ch. 13 (esp. pp. 241–246).

defined as that which is most true (τὸ ἀληθέστατον). Given such premises, the division between body and soul, which hitherto had been conceived in generic terms, without any metaphysical implications, now points to two different spheres of reality and two corresponding desires for possession. On the one hand, we have the philosopher's desire (οὗ ἐπιθυμοῦμεν, 66b7; οὗ ἐπιθυμοῦμεν τε καὶ φαμὲν ἐρασταί εἶναι, 66e2–4), which is directed towards the possession (κτῆσις) of knowledge (φρόνησις, εἰδέναι) of what is pure (εἰλικρινές, 66a2–3), namely being (τῶν ὄντων, 66a3; τοῦ ὄντος, 66c2) and truth (τὸ ἀληθές, 66b7). This possession is understood as touching (τῆς ἀληθείας ἅπτεται, 65b9) and seeing (τὸ ἀληθέστατον θεωρεῖται, 65e2; καθορᾶν τἀληθές, 66d7) the truth:[40] not in the logical sense of this word, but in its ontological sense (as also attested by the *Phaedrus*[41]), which is to say as a direct apprehension of what is *truly* being (namely, the Forms).[42] On the other hand, we have desires (Ἐρώτων τε καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν, 66c2; ἐπιθυμίαι, 66c7) directed towards the possession (κτῆσιν, 66c8; κτᾶσθαι, 66d1) of those goods (χρήματα, 66c7–8) we are forced to obtain on account of the body, as though we were its slaves (66c8–d2).

Such, then, is the overall meaning of these pages. Plato sets out from a mild and rather insignificant opposition between body and soul, compatible not only with lighter interpretations of Socratism,[43] but also – at least to some extent – with traditional culture (see e.g. the mention of poets at 65b3–4): for the aim of this common Platonic approach is to present a highly original point of view as merely the development of traditional conceptions. The philosopher then moves on to propose a rather heavy metaphysical conception, which brings into play all the most challenging aspects of what is usually called Platonism (a realistic interpretation of universals, metaphysical and epistemological dualism, the immortality of the soul, etc.). Now, while it is quite understandable that modern sensibility tends to favour the weak version of dualism found in the first lines of this text, there is nothing to justify

40 It would be a serious mistake to understand these verbs (ἅπτομαι, θεωρεῖν, καθορᾶν) as implying some kind of reference to sense-perception (cf. Trabattoni 2016, pp. 31–38; 2022, p. 280). Socrates is alluding here to the direct contact between the soul, once it is detached from the body, and pure intelligible entities. The real nature of this contact cannot of course be further clarified, as in the present life the human soul has no access to such a condition. But what is quite sure is that this contact, even assuming that it is somehow possible, *cannot* be sensible.

41 47b5–6, with my commentary in Trabattoni 2013, pp. 312–313.

42 This does not mean that an idea is 'more being' than its corresponding sensible, but rather that it represents perfectly the character which the corresponding sensible possesses only in a partial, relative, and temporary way. See Trabattoni 2005.

43 Particularly Antisthenes' interpretation: see ch. 5.

the direct translation of this preference onto the exegetical level: the whole structure of Plato's argument, just like the aim it pursues (i.e. to explain and defend the philosopher's μελήτη θανάτου on the level of *eudaimonia*), requires exactly the opposite route: for Plato, the superiority of the soul's activities over material and corporeal activities is not a 'human' fact that continues to apply even if we drop its metaphysical assumptions – and this, for the simple fact that such metaphysical assumptions are the only possible justification of this superiority. Therefore, the hypothesis that full knowledge of reality can only be attained after death is a doctrine which the *Phaedo* must necessarily uphold, lest its whole theoretical scaffolding collapse.

CHAPTER 2

Suicide

1 Cebes' Amazement

In *Phaedo* 60c, Cebes addresses a question to Socrates on behalf of the poet and rhetor Euenus. Why on earth – he asks – did Socrates set out to write poetry for the first time in his life when in gaol, by putting Aesop's fables to metre? Socrates answers by saying that he had followed the advice received in a dream, and before wrapping the whole matter up, he takes the opportunity to advise Euenus – via his Theban guest – to choose the same fate as his own, if he is wise (61b–c). Upon hearing this, Simmias steps in, not without some unintentional comic overtones, to state that Euenus certainly has no desire to heed this advice. Yet, Socrates replies, he ought to do so if he is a philosopher; but without committing suicide, "for they say that it isn't sanctioned" (οὐ γάρ φασι θεμιτὸν εἶναι, 61c10). Cebes detects a contradiction in Socrates' words: how can a philosopher long to die, yet at the same time not be allowed to kill himself? From a more general perspective, why is suicide forbidden? Cebes has indeed heard something from Philolaus with regard to this, but nothing too specific. Socrates reassures him that now he will be able to hear something else; he then continues:

> However, maybe it will seem surprising to you if this (*touto*) and nothing else is simple – if, that is, it never happens for humankind that, as in other matters, at certain times and for certain people it is better to be dead than alive (a); and as for those for whom it is better to be dead, maybe it seems surprising to you if it is impious for these people to benefit themselves, but they must wait for someone else to be their benefactor. (b)[1]

Kenneth Dorter deemed the passage "one of the most obscure statements in all of the dialogues".[2] In particular, he distinguished four different problems within it:

1 ἴσως μέντοι θαυμαστόν σοι φανεῖται εἰ τοῦτο μόνον τῶν ἄλλων ἁπάντων ἁπλοῦν ἐστιν, καὶ οὐδέποτε τυγχάνει τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, ὥσπερ καὶ τἆλλα, ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς βέλτιον ὂν τεθνάναι ἢ ζῆν, οἷς δὲ βέλτιον τεθνάναι, θαυμαστὸν ἴσως σοι φαίνεται εἰ τούτοις τοῖς ἀνθρώποις μὴ ὅσιον αὐτοὺς ἑαυτοὺς εὖ ποιεῖν, ἀλλὰ ἄλλον δεῖ περιμένειν εὐεργέτην.

2 Dorter 1982, p 11. See also Gallop 1975, p. 79: "The grammar and logic of this intractable sentence are much disputed."

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1. The amazement mentioned at the beginning is compatible both with the possibility that the statement it refers to is true and with the possibility that it is false;
2. the word *touto*, by which the concept is introduced, may either refer to what comes before (the prohibition of suicide) or anticipate the statement that follows;
3. this statement, according to which it does not happen that *sometimes* it is better to live and sometimes better to die, may mean either that it is *always* better to die than to live or the opposite;
4. the second amazement mentioned in the text may also derive either from the fact that the following statement is true or from the fact that it is false. (p. 12)

As far as (2) is concerned, let us call 'A' the interpretation according to which "this alone of things" refers to the prohibition of suicide. If, instead, "this alone of things" refers to what follows ('B'), there are two possibilities:[3]

B1: "this alone of things" means that death is always preferable to death (as suggested by Bluck and Dorter, among others);

B2: "this alone of things" means that life is always preferable to death (as suggested by Burnet and Hackforth, among others).

According to Gallop, 'A' must be divided into three subclasses:

A1: the clause includes only the first part of (a), i.e. "it will seem surprising to you if this and nothing else is simple" (Loriaux 1969);

A2: the clause includes the first and the second part of (a), i.e. "it will seem surprising to you if this and nothing else is simple, if, that is, it never happens for humankind that, as in other matters …" (Tarán 1966);

A3: the clause includes the first, the second, and the third part of (a), i.e. "it will seem surprising to you if this and nothing else is simple, if, that is, it never happens for humankind that, as in other matters, at certain times and for certain people it is better to be dead than alive".

3 Cf. Miles 2001, p. 250.

A3 is the interpretation suggested by Gallop himself. He chooses, first, 'A' against 'B'; and A3 is intended to overcome the problems arising from A1 and A2: A1 "takes P2+P3 [the second and third parts of (a)] in an unnatural way", while A3 implies a punctuation that "leaves P3 [the third part of (a)] without a connective particle".

However, it is very unlikely that the *touto* clause ("this alone of things") refers to the prohibition of suicide. If this were the case, the two parts of Socrates' sentence ('a' and 'b') would be saying almost the same thing: "suicide is forbidden without exceptions" (a); "it is forbidden to benefit oneself through suicide" (b). And this remains true, I think, no matter which option is chosen of the two suggested by Dorter (pp. 12–13):

> it is surprising, yet false, that suicide is never a just act, and it is equally surprising, yet true, that suicide is forbidden;

> it surprising, yet true, that suicide is never a just act, and it is equally surprising, yet true, that one cannot kill oneself, even when this means doing good to oneself.

The structure of Socrates' sentence ('a' + 'b'), however, suggests that "b" makes a fresh point with respect to 'a'.

Even worse is B1, which I will quote according to Dorter:

> it is surprising, yet true, that always better to die than to live, and it is equally surprising true, that suicide is forbidden.

Cebes' alleged amazement, as it is expounded in 'B', concerns the prohibition of suicide. But this amazement is consistent with the premise that it is always better to live than to die, and not – clearly – with the opposite one (namely, that it is always better to die than to live).

Anyway, Dorter expresses his preference for the first last interpretation (which he calls 'traditional', though it is not shared by authoritative English-speaking scholars such as Burnet and Hackforth). He believes that the remaining part of this section, and in a way of the entire dialogue, constitutes an attempt to increasingly clarify the two paradoxes enunciated in 'A'), and particularly the superiority of death over life.[4]

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4 The analyses I have summed up above may be found on pp. 11–19 of Dorter's book. Yet a different solution is suggested by M. Dixsaut (who nonetheless only focuses on lines 2–5,

2 The Argument

I think that in order to understand properly the meaning of the passage here at issue, it is necessary to frame the passage within the dialogical context of which it is part. One must take into consideration, in particular, that Socrates is not making any positive statement about life and death, but only interpreting and justifying Cebes' amazement for the benefit of both his interlocutors and of the reader. Let us sum up the stages leading to this passage:

1. The philosopher longs to die;
2. however, he cannot commit suicide;
3. Cebes' amazement: how can (1) and (2) be reconciled?
4. more generally, even apart from the fact that the philosopher longs to die, why is suicide forbidden?

Socrates begins his investigation from point (4) (and only subsequently introduces the theme of μελέτη θανάτου). The game which Plato plays in this regard is quite evident. Pythagorean philosophers like Philolaus, while largely sharing

overlooking the rest). In her view, the problem can be solved by considering τοῦτο to be governed by the clause ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς βέλτιον <ὂν> τεθνάναι ἢ ζῆν, in such a way as to preserve the parallel μόνον τῶν ἄλλων ἁπάντων ἁπλοῦν … οὐδέποτε τυγχάνει τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, ὥσπερ καὶ τἆλλα, and by assigning a strong meaning to τυγχάνει. The passage thus ought to be translated as follows: "Sans doute sera-ce pour toi un sujet d'étonnement que, parmi tous les autres faits, celui-là seul soit simple et n'arrive jamais à l'homme à la manière dont tous les autres événements lui arrivent: à savoir qui il y a des moments où et des hommes pour qui il vaut mieux mourir que de vivre" (Dixsaut 1985, pp. 223–224, n. 44; 1991, p. 327, n. 54) We can understand Dixsaut's interpretation if we formalise the proposition as follows: "you will be surprised if X occurs, which in the specific case at hand means Y." According to this scholar, the sentence καὶ οὐδέποτε κτλ. is not part of Y (the enunciation explaining the 'amazement'), but rather of X. This reduces Y to the clause beginning with ἔστιν ὅτε and no longer has a negative meaning. Consequently, the amazement which Socrates alludes to would not refer to the proposition "it is always better to die than to live" (bear in mind here the third difficulty noted by Dorter), but to the proposition "it is true, without any exceptions, that for certain human beings and in certain conditions it is better to die than to live" (while evidently for other human beings this is not the case). But this interpretation seems very bizarre. Does it really make sense to affirm the absolute nature of such a weak (and hence rather obvious) proposition such as that establishing that in certain cases A is better than non-A? And could Cebes reasonably be surprised by such a statement? Can any instance be found of someone deeming it necessary to specify that the proposition "sometimes it rains and sometimes it doesn't" is always true, and of someone else being surprised by the fact that this statement is regarded as an absolute rule? According to Dixsaut, if the *touto* clause is understood as a "proposition ne comportant pas d'exeption … la suite de la phrase: 'quant à ceux pour qui il vaut mieux être mort' deviant incohérente" (1991, p. 327, n. 54). But Dixsaut fails to realise that the second part of Socrates' sentence (b) depends upon the supposition that the first if false: if this is the case, as in fact we will show, there is no contradiction between them.

Plato's ethical ideas, do not have a sufficiently precise doctrine. Hence, it is necessary to overturn the ideas evoked so far through a philosophy that is more solid from a scientific and epistemic perspective. Such is precisely the operation which Plato performs in the *Phaedo*, which upholds the thesis of the soul's immortality not with vague mythical accounts, but with the demonstrable and necessary theory of the Forms. By first addressing point (4), Socrates sets out to define the problem. He has stated that suicide is not permissible (point 2). Cebes has also heard of this prohibition from Philolaus, yet no one has explained the reason for it to him; hence, he wishes the issue to be elucidated. Clearly, he does not believe that it is an absolute law. In the passage we are analysing, Socrates points to two possible and alternative reasons why Cebes (or anyone else) might doubt the permissibility of suicide:

1. as committing suicide means killing oneself, one reason that might make suicide permissible would be the admission that death is better than life, at least sometimes or for some people. By contrast, suicide would be utterly impermissible, if it were established that life is always better than death. But then one would truly wonder: how could *this* phenomenon alone (*touto*, i.e. the case at hand) be so simple as to admit of no alternative, so that it is always better to live than to die? If, conversely, this phenomenon too, like all other human affairs, allows for exceptions, then there are bound to be some cases in which suicide is permissible. For otherwise,
2. if there are cases in which it is better to die than to live, it would be equally amazing if suicide were forbidden: why should an individual not be allowed to do good to himself, but have to wait for a benefactor?

In other words, Socrates firstly supposes that Cebes' amazement derives from his assumption that the proposition "to live is better than to die without exceptions" is *true*. But Socrates, of course, does not know if this hypothesis is correct. Therefore, he suggests a second possibility, depending on the opposite hypothesis, i.e. that according to Cebes the proposition "to live is better than to die without exceptions" is *false*. In this case Cebes' amazement would be explained by a different reason: Cebes would be amazed not (as in the first case, in which the proposition "to live is better than to die without exceptions" is assumed to be *true*) because it is amazing that "to live is better than to die without exceptions"; but rather because it is amazing that, when it comes to "those for whom it is better to be dead" (assuming that they actually exist, as implied by the hypothesis according to which the claim that "to live is better than to die without exceptions" is *false*),

"it is impious for these people to benefit themselves, but they must wait for someone else to be their benefactor".

In such a way, the passage becomes perfectly clear, and can be translated as follows:

> Perhaps you might be amazed if this were the only case which is without exception, and it never happened in the case of man (unlike in the case of other things [which always admit of exceptions]) that for certain human beings and in certain circumstances it is better to die than to live; and if there are some for whom it is better to die, you might be amazed if it were not a saintly thing for them to do good to themselves, but that they must wait for some other benefactor.

The translation I have just suggested must be justified, showing that it is consistent with the Greek. I will do so through a discussion of the most recent and interesting proposal, put forward by G. Boter (2007). Let me expound first the main lines of his interpretation. It is based on two central premises:

> Bo1: "The vast majority of interpreters believe that two separate statements are made at 62a2–7... But because Cebes' question at 61d3–5 concerns the combination of two notions, it is a priori likely that in 62a2–7, when referring to this question by means of the phrase ἴσως μέντοι θαυμαστόν σοι φανεῖται, Socrates deals with the combination of these two notions too"; (p. 19)

> Bo2: As in Gallop's (and others') interpretations, Boter maintains that "this alone of things" refers to the prohibition of suicide (= "A": see above).

Starting from these two points, Boter's reconstruction of the passage follows the paraphrase suggested by Hackhforth in his commentary (but not adopted by him in his translation):

> But I daresay you find it surprising that, whereas in this matter (*sc.* of life and death) the same principle holds good as in other human affairs (it would be astonishing if it did not), namely that life is not invariably preferable, but for some people and on some occasions death is so, nevertheless it should be accounted sinful for those for whom death is preferable to be their own benefactors, etc. (Hackforth 1972, p. 51)

If this is Socrates' argument, from a logical point of view the second part of his sentence can be condensed in the following way:

> it never happens in the case of man, as it does in all other affairs, (a) that there are situations in which – and people for whom – death is better than life and (b) that people for whom death is better are allowed to kill themselves. (p. 21)

Boter thus thinks that Socrates is not envisaging two different possible reasons for Cebes' amazement (first, that the rule according to which it is better to live than to die is true without exceptions; second, that suicide is forbidden, i.e. that "it is impious for these people etc."), but only one (the latter). If Socrates chooses to repeat the hypothetical clause "maybe it seems surprising to you" twice, this is because he aims to make his points more intelligible to Cebes, not least in view of the fact that theirs is an oral conversation:

> when sentences are getting too long and too complicated, the speaker may advance the understanding of the listener by making a new start with the sentence, in which the content of what has already been expressed may be summed up. (p. 21)

So,

> the speaker makes a fresh start by repeating the introductory phrase in a slightly modified form, θαυμαστόν ἴσως σοι φαίνεται εἰ ("maybe it seems surprising to you if"). (p. 21)

Based on these considerations, according to Boter the translation of the passage must run as follows:

> Maybe it will seem surprising to you that this alone of all other things is unconditional, that is (καὶ *explicativum*), that it never happens to be the case for man, as it does in all other affairs, that there are circumstances under which and people for whom death is better than life, and that for those people for whom death is better – maybe it seems surprising to you that for those people it is unholy to do good to themselves, but that they have to wait for another benefactor. (p. 22)

Though it is quite a plausible and well-argued interpretation, I think that a careful analysis of the Greek shows it to be untenable.

First, the presence of the adverb ἴσως ("maybe") in both hypothetical sentences suggests that Socrates is hesitating between two possible reasons for Cebes' amazement: *maybe* it is the first hypothesis ("it is true that it is better to live than to die, without exceptions), *maybe* the second one (that suicide is forbidden, i.e. that "it is impious for these people etc."). I realise that this is not a decisive argument, but I believe that if there were only one reason for Cebes' amazement, the second ἴσως would have been omitted.

Secondly, if the καὶ (and) at line a3 is *explicativum* (as Boter himself maintains), it is very likely that τοῦτο (this) at line a2 is proleptic, as is quite commonly the case in Plato:[5] it should not be referred to what Socrates previously said (i.e. the prohibition of suicide), but rather to what he is about to say now (i.e. that to live is better than to die).

The main argument against Boter's interpretation, however, concerns 62a4: ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς βέλτιον ὂν τεθνάναι ἢ ζῆν. This clause is normally understood as stating a matter of fact. But in this case, as scholars have actually remarked, we are faced with an anacoluthon, which makes it difficult to find a suitable translation: a fresh point is inserted in the argument, which not only has no evident connection with what comes before, but even seems to be inconsistent with it (in particular if what Socrates previously said is understood as a matter of fact). Unsurprisingly, in order to make his translation work, Boter is forced to introduce some words that find no correspondence in the Greek ("circumstances under which"). But there is no need for such an insertion, as the Greek allows for a far more promising solution – or so it seems to me. We can assume that the clause "there are also people for whom" is not stating a matter of fact, but a possibility, depending on the "if" (εἰ) at line 62a2. In this way, the anacoluthon simply disappears (along with the translation difficulties).

Three further remarks support this proposal. First, this solution explains the presence of "and" (*καί*) at line 64a4: while the first hypothesis supposes that there are no people for whom it is better to live than to die, the second hypothesis suspends this rule, and admits the possibility that for some people (not all!) it is better to die that to live. The following lines proceed exactly in the way the reader would expect them to: since we have admitted that there are some people for whom it is better to die than to live, it seems amazing that the people for whom it is better to die (οἷς δὲ βέλτιον τεθνάναι) must wait for a benefactor etc. Secondly, an unexpressed 'if' must be supposed at line 62a3: why not assume that it is also implied at line 62a4, immediately before ἐστίν?'

5 See Kuhner-Gerth 1898, pp. 658–59.

Thirdly, the proposed reading would give Socrates' sentence a clear and elegant chiastic structure:

(A) maybe Cebes will be amazed
(B) if he thinks that for no one is it better to die than to live
or
(B) if he thinks that for some people it is better to die than to live,
(A) maybe Cebes will be amazed
if (…)

The opposite options envisaged here by Socrates respect the conditions required for contradictory propositions by Aristotle in *De int*. 7: a universal negative is opposed by a particular affirmative.

One could object that, if I were right, Cebes should have replied by clarifying which of the two kinds of amazement he was feeling. But he does nothing of the sort. He limits himself, instead, to a kind of smiling and enthusiastic approval, showing that Socrates has perfectly understood his thought. But this only proves that Socrates' intention is not to observe some conversational requirement, as Boter supposes, but rather to pursue an objective that is far from uncommon in Socrates' way of discussing, namely: to attain a full clarification of the problem at issue, including all its relevant aspects, no matter whether the theses discussed are actually expounded by the interlocutors of the dialogue or not. This 'completeness' requirement is, indeed, the necessary condition on which the soundness of arguments and refutations depends.

It is hardly surprising, in fact, that Cebes does not understand Socrates' attempt to guess the reasons for his amazement, as if he were expecting a choice on his part. Cebes certainly does not need to wait for the kind of grotesque invitation that Socrates has addressed to Evenus to know that according to him death is not an evil, but can even be a good thing. Socrates' whole life is proof of this principle: in particular his behaviour in the last days, from his attitude during the trial to his opposition to his friends' attempts to help him escape from gaol. The point is that this belief seems to be quite inconsistent with what Socrates has just said about suicide. Through Socrates' summary, in other words, Plato intends to present and explain with the utmost clarity the problem that must now be solved. Supposing that suicide is forbidden in all cases, it seems that one of the two following consequences must obtain: either (1) there is some circumstance in which one cannot do good to oneself, in which case Socrates' eudaimonism becomes untenable; or (2) there is no circumstance in which it is better to die than to live, in which case Socrates' eudaimonism can be saved, but his philosophical beliefs and his life-choice cannot: Callicles was

right and Socrates wrong. Cebes' enthusiastic exclamation shows that he has realised that Socrates has perfectly grasped his point.

But if this is true, we have found a further and more philosophical reason why Boter's interpretation seems to be incorrect: the existence of two possible explanations for Cebes' amazement is required by the need to respect the philosophical importance that Plato assigns to the passage at issue. What is at stake is not the contingent problem of the holiness/unholiness of suicide. Rather, it is the evaluation of Socrates' entire life and thought, at the crucial and definitive moment of his death. If death is not only sometimes better that life, but generally the more advisable choice for the philosopher, then why is suicide forbidden? And if suicide is allowed, does it follow that the top philosopher is killing himself? Why should he not, if for a philosopher it is better to be dead than alive?

3 The Morality of Happiness

It may be argued, therefore, that the topic of suicide, which certainly represents the first theoretical crux investigated in the *Phaedo*, sets the agenda for the following part of the dialogue (and maybe for Plato's philosophy as a whole). Socrates has allowed the accusation levelled against him, his trial, and his imprisonment to become a genuine chronicle of a death foretold. Why has he done so? Why has he not defended himself in court in a more effective way? Why has he not accepted Crito's advice and chosen the easy route of breaking out of gaol, as his friends had planned? To defend himself against these accusations, the Socrates of the *Phaedo* cannot merely invoke vague oral precepts, or generic remarks about respecting his dignity. The friends entertaining him during his last conversation wish to know if the choices he has made are advantageous for him or not, and if they would be advantageous for others too (in particular for themselves, since they are his disciples) under similar circumstances. If not, Socrates' behaviour might seem noble and dignified, but it might also seem laughable (according to the malicious 'prophecy' uttered by Callicles in the *Gorgias*).[6] Here we can clearly see Plato's hand at work: he has written the *Phaedo* to defend Socrates' behaviour, and hence the philosophical life which he embodies, not merely – and not so much – as a noble and unrepeatable attitude, but as a concrete life model that is appealing on the level of happiness and effective from a practical standpoint. To do so, Plato must of

6 486a–b.

course show that death was not an evil for Socrates. This aim is achieved by bringing the doctrine of the immortality of the soul into play. But Plato must also show that the philosopher is not someone who is dying in the common sense of the word,[7] nor a man who is keen to estrange himself from the earthly dimension and to flee from it as soon as he gets the chance.[8] Although in a way he finds the fulfilment of his desires in death, the philosopher is not avoiding his earthly responsibilities and committing suicide. This attitude, comparable to the courage by which a soldier might remain at his post, as mentioned in the *Apology*,[9] must be justified within the 'eudaimonistic' boundaries set by the 'defence' developed in the *Phaedo*.[10] If death were always an evil for those who die, Socrates' attitude would no doubt be unreasonable. If, conversely, death were always a good for the philosopher, Socrates' behaviour would be equally unreasonable, but for the opposite reason: why did he not kill himself straight away, as soon as he acquired a philosophical consciousness?

At this point, we can also understand why the *Phaedo* passage we have been discussing has so frequently been misunderstood. Many interpreters may have been influenced by a more or less conscious rejection of the logic according to which Socrates illustrates those conditions that would make suicide permissible: a logic whereby there is no difference between what must be done and what brings happiness. If it were better to die than to live, there would be no

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7 Cf. *Phaed.*, 64a–b.

8 See ch. 3.

9 *Apol.* 28d–29a.

10 Miles 2001 admits that only in the light of Socratic eudaimonism does the prohibition of suicide become inconsistent with the possibility that to die may be better than to live. But he thinks that the eudaimonistic perspective should be limited to the earlier Socratic dialogues, while in the *Phaedo* "the new moral theology of the Orphic/Pythagorean mysteries" (p. 254) is at work. It follows that "Cebes' difficulty … must be the uneasy juxtaposition of the Pythagorean and the Socratic in this dialogue". In other words, there is a conflict, according to Miles, between Socratic "individual happiness" and "divine or cosmic duty in the last portion of the *Phaedo*" (p. 257). I think that this interpretation is wrong, for at least two reasons. First, in the *Phaedo* there are no signs of any kind of 'duty', be it 'divine', 'cosmic' or of any other sort. The second defense that Socrates sets up in the *Phaedo* lies precisely in showing that his choices are the most convenient in terms of his happiness, and in fact he brings it to a conclusion without ever straying from this objective. Indeed, he is convinced that he has good hopes of obtaining a better life after death, as the arguments in favour of this hypothesis strike him as much more convincing than those against it. This also applies to the prohibition of suicide, which Socrates accepts and justifies in this case too, as the best option for the pursuit of happiness. Secondly, there are no grounds to say that Pythagorean-Orphic theology is more Platonic than Socratic. As we will see in Ch. 6, in the *Phaedo* Plato rather intends to distance himself from this background (cf. Ebert 1994, 2001, 2004).

good reason to remain alive: for if we are certain that an action (even suicide) does us good, we have no good reason not to undertake it.

This explanation is confirmed by the fact that Plato solves the problem of suicide without in any way invoking the abstract principle of duty, but rather by always keeping to the eudaimonistic perspective: man cannot commit suicide because he is in the hands of good masters, who care for his good in a far more effective way than he himself does (62d–e). And it is again this perspective which drives the discussion at the end of the passage: if man on earth is in the hands of truly good masters, why does the philosopher long to escape? What advantage does he expect to gain from death (63a)? In other words: the defence of Socrates which Plato develops in the *Phaedo* keeps closely to the argumentative line just illustrated, which is designed to show that practising virtue coincides with man's true interest. Naturally, most interpreters of Plato acknowledge this principle. However, in most cases they seem to understand it in Stoic terms: they take it to mean that the exercising of virtue brings happiness. But in the case of Plato's Socrates we also find the reverse idea: no obligation is of any value if it goes against the happiness of the person subject to it. The passage on suicide must also be understood in such terms. The programme it lays out does not consist in showing that the philosopher has specific duties, such that he ought to scorn death and neglect his own happiness. The idea that Socrates announces and embraces is instead that suicide, like any other act, cannot be prevented if not by showing that it is not advantageous for the person seeking to commit it. What would amaze both Cebes and Socrates would be the existence of circumstances in which a person cannot do good to himself. When couched in such terms, ethical eudaimonism strikes many people as unacceptable. However, they fail to consider that according to Plato the good proper to the philosopher does not at all coincide with ordinary pleasure (for it is a different kind of 'pleasure'), and that it cannot in any way be separated from the good of other human beings.[11] Furthermore, any attempt to distinguish between a virtuous sequence ("first I will take care of other people's good and then ensure my own") and a vicious one ("I will first of all take care of my own good, confident that in doing so I will also benefit

11 Referring to the *Crito* and *Republic* (the obligation to return to the cave), Dorter 1982 observed that according to Plato "it is not true ... that if something is good for us we can do it without regard to its consequences for others" (p. 16). I am convinced that the evidence cited by Dorter is not sufficient to cast doubt on the eudaimonistic character of Socratic-Platonic ethics; but this is a problem that I cannot deal with here. What seems essential to me is the fact that for Plato ethical action does not require an independent concern for the good of others, since according to him there cannot be any *truly* beneficial act for us that is harmful to others (see Gill 1996, Rowe 2007).

others") has no meaning for Plato (or perhaps even in general). It would be interesting to list all the attempts which scholars have made to free Plato of this inconvenient belief, driven more by their own moral convictions than by objective enquiries.[12]

12 There is a symbolic date that marks the beginning of the philosophical debate on Socrates' (and Plato's) ethical eudaimonism: the famous lecture held by Harold Prichard in Oxford in 1928 (Prichard 2002). According to him, "when we seriously face the view that unless an action be advantageous, it cannot really be a duty, we are forced both to abandon it and also to allow that even if it were true, it would not enable us to vindicate the truth of our ordinary moral convictions". In the wake of Prichard's considerations many scholars have attempted to show that Socratic-Platonic ethics admits of the notion of 'duty' and does not run against our ordinary moral convictions. Consider, for instance, the countless attempts made to sugar-coat the *Protagoras* passage describing the art of accurately measuring pleasures (353c ff.). Two authoritative examples are provided by Guthrie 1975, pp. 221–235 and Irwin 1977, according to whom the *Protagoras'* 'eudaimonism' is wholly Socratic, whereas for Plato "the virtuous man chooses virtuous action for itself, apart from its consequences" (p. 174). Among the most recent scholars to have adopted a similar interpretation see, e.g., Brown 2007. As I have endeavoured to show elsewhere (cf. Trabattoni 2004, 2014, 2021, 2021a), I deem this opinion untenable. Indeed, I believe that there is a Socratic-Platonic ethic, present in various ways in the Platonic dialogues prior to the *Republic*, which is entirely 'intellectualistic' and 'eudaimonistic' (I substantially agree, in this regard, with Penner-Rowe 2005). The recurring attempts to introduce into it elements contrasting with this picture (such as, for instance, a sense of duty of Kantian origin) depend precisely on the desire, expressed by Prichard, to bring Socratic-Platonic ethics into accord with "our moral convictions". For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Trabattoni 2021.

CHAPTER 3

Virtue

1 The Philosopher and Virtue: A Digression?

In this chapter I intend to discuss the alleged contrast that is said to exist between the 'ascetic' version of the doctrine of the soul, discernible in the *Phaedo*, and the 'political' one that, conversely, is present in the *Republic*.

We shall mainly be dealing here with the passage in the *Phaedo* in which Socrates quickly moves on to examine the principal virtues, having exhausted the argument of the philosopher's desire for death/exercise in dying (*melete thanatou*). Let us recall the context in which this section is included. At the beginning of the dialogue Socrates, invited by his friends to show how he could maintain the philosopher's alleged happiness (Socrates in the *Apology* had said that nothing bad or lifeless can happen to the philosopher either in life or in death, 41c–d) even in the face of death, says that the whole life of the philosopher is an exercise in dying, as only after death will it be possible (if it is possible at all) to achieve the only true objective of his existence, namely the knowledge of Forms (see chapter 1). Therefore it would be foolish for him to fear death when it comes (67d–e). At a superficial glance it seems very difficult to find in Plato a more impolitic position than this. The happiness of the philosopher – more or less as stated in the *Theaetetus*' digression (173c–177c) – is nothing less than an escape from the world; that is, the transfer to a different and better dimension. But what about the ethical and political vocation of the philosopher? And what about *eudaimonia*, about private and public good in the present life? In fact, even here, as in the *Theaetetus*, Plato scatters several warnings to alert the reader that the paradox is only apparent.[1] In the following pages I am going to argue that one of these warnings is to be found in the *Phaedo* passage here taken into consideration.

Socrates has just finished proving that the true philosopher cannot fear death. He goes on:

> Then he said, 'if you see that a man is resentful that he is about to die, is that sufficient proof for you that he was not a lover of wisdom but a sort

1 As far as the *Theaetetus* is concerned, see Trabattoni 2018, pp. LXXXVII–XCI.

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> of body-lover? And this same man, I take it, is also a money-lover and honour-lover, either one of these or both.'
>
> 'It's entirely as you say,' he said.
>
> 'So, Simmias,' he said, 'doesn't that which is called "courage" also belong most to those with this attitude?'
>
> 'Quite so,' he said.
>
> And temperance as well – that which even ordinary people call "temperance", namely not being in a flutter about one's desires, but rather being disdainful towards them and staying composed – doesn't that belong only to those who particularly disdain the body and live in philosophy? (68b–c)

Then, Socrates develops a series of arguments to clarify the difference between common virtues (which we could call demotic) and truly philosophical virtues. The starting point for moving from the theme of death to that of virtues is offered in a completely natural way by the evident connection between death and courage. But this is not sufficient to justify the insertion, at this precise point in the text, of a treatment of the virtues which interrupts the linear logical development of the dialogue: (1) Socrates is about to die; (2) he must show that death is not bad for him; (3) he does so by showing that philosophy is an exercise in preparing for death; and (4) he must however also show (as Cebes asks him at 70a, because otherwise the reasoning would be flawed) that man, or at least his soul, survives death. It seems rather obvious that this line of reasoning should immediately be followed by the demonstration of the immortality of the soul. What does a 'digression' about virtues have to do with this scheme?

2 A Contradiction between *Phaedo* and *Republic?*

We will take as a guiding thread for understanding the meaning of this juxtaposition one of the latest comprehensive interpretations of the *Phaedo* to have been put forward, namely the book on this dialogue by Dorothea Frede. Frede sees in this passage a kind of bogus starting point.[2] The attempt to clarify the nature of philosophical virtue and its superiority in relation to common virtue must be deemed a failure due to its having been carried out on the basis of overly brief and simplistic suppositions. On the one hand, criticism of the common virtues assumes that these are only supported by hedonistic ends while

2 Frede 1999, pp. 26–33.

skipping all the other possible motivational contexts; on the other, that same philosophical virtue is entirely concentrated on the afterlife, with the result that courage is simply equated with the lack of fear in the face of death, and temperance with the need to ward off inclinations that can throw man off the path to unearthly reality.[3] Frede goes on to say that Plato himself was dissatisfied with this manner of treating virtue, as evinced by the fact that, though mentioned alongside the others, the virtue of justice is not analysed in depth: indeed, it would have been somewhat tricky to treat an essentially social virtue like justice with the same otherworldly perspective as the one in which courage and temperance are examined in the passage.

This demonstrates, according to Frede, that defining true virtue purely on the basis of its purifying powers in relation to worldly needs and desires neither

3 The idea that in this passage of the *Phaedo* real philosophical virtue is restricted to the afterlife, and thus is of no practical use, is shared by E. C. Halper (Halper 2018). He comes to this conclusion starting from the Platonic identity between virtue and knowledge and pointing out that, according to Socrates, the philosopher's soul can attain the knowledge of Forms only when it is detached from the body (66e–67a). Unlike Frede, however, Halper does not consider this to be a problem. He thinks, in fact, that in the *Phaedo* Plato introduces a feasible philosophical virtue, understood as the knowledge of the soul (namely of the self), which is different both from the unattainable virtue that is the knowledge of Forms and from the false virtue practised by non-philosophical people. Though I am very sympathetic towards Halper's emphasis on *Phaedo* 66–67, and in general towards the idea that according to Plato the human capacity to know Forms is quite limited, I think that he goes too far on this path. As I have attempted to show in the previous chapter, at 66e–67a Socrates does not deny that the embodied soul has a certain knowledge of Forms, but only the possibility of having this knowledge as a full apprehension of them. In Plato's philosophy, the rule which is actually applied in the ideal and perfect world is at the same time the rule that must roughly be followed, as a model, in the real and imperfect one. As a consequence, in Plato there are not two different philosophical virtues: the former being the higher but useless one, which is knowledge of certain things (Forms); and the latter being the lower but useful one, which is knowledge of a different object (the soul). For Plato there is a single philosophical virtue that is identified with the knowledge of Forms, but at various degrees of precision (perfect knowledge possessed by the disembodied soul, approximate knowledge possessed by the soul when linked to the body). Therefore, it is incorrect to say, as Halper does, that if Plato's intention was "to speak only of knowledge of the form, the currency metaphor would be inapt because this knowledge *is* (true) virtue" (p. 127). The very reason why Plato insists on identifying virtue with knowledge (of Forms) is not because he intends to turn ethical virtue into theoretical activity or contemplation (as Plotinus will do some centuries later); it is rather his intention to stress that if ethics is correctly understood according to the eudaimonistic principle, there cannot be any gap between theoretical knowledge (finding its *climax* in the knowledge of the good) and its practical implementations. It is precisely in this sense, which involves the peculiar kind of identity which Plato refers to, that knowledge can be called, as in the *Phaedo*, the current of virtue (regardless of the fact that this implies, strictly speaking, that it is *not* exactly the same thing as virtue).

promotes a rightful distinction between common virtue and philosophical virtue, nor adequately describes the nature of the latter. Hence, it is already clear from this section of the *Phaedo* that the issue needs to be studied in a more in-depth and articulated manner: Plato will fulfil this task, especially with regard to justice, in the *Republic* through a "wholly new approach" (*Ansatz*).[4]

Here is a paradigmatic case of the so-called "developmentalist approach": in a certain dialogue, Plato attempts to address a problem to the best of his abilities; but then he notices that the setting he has laid out is flawed, or in some way unworkable, so in another dialogue he propounds a new, different theory intended to replace the first one. I have argued elsewhere[5] against this method of reading the dialogues, and I don't want to repeat myself here. I will only point out that the 'developmentalist' solution should be called upon as the last and weakest hypothesis, where nothing better can actually be found. It is very unlikely, indeed, that a Platonic dialogue is to be read as a series of errors and corrections. Taking, for example, the several versions of the dialectic method set forth in the dialogues, one would be hard-pressed to pinpoint both the flawed ones and their rightful replacement(s) as designated by Plato. What should be understood as 'the dialectic method of Plato': the *noesis* of the *Republic*? Or the method of analysis and synthesis emphatically heralded in the *Phaedrus*?[6] Or the model at work in the exercise Parmenides carried out in the homonymous dialogue? Or is it the dichotomic method in use in the *Sophist* and in the *Statesman*? Or, again, is it the act of making 'one and many', as described in the *Philebus*? Must one hold that one or more of these methods has amended or replaced any of the others? Whither does the 'evolution'. of Plato's thought progress with regard to dialectic? Which methods does the author deem flawed, and why? To me it seems clear that no sensible answer can be given to any of these questions.

3 Philosophy as Politics

If Plato's alleged shifts in opinion are not philosophically significant, let us then try to verify whether the passage of the *Phaedo* mentioned above can also be explained without resorting to an evolutionary and diachronic kind of interpretation such as the one suggested by Frede. As I said, in this passage Socrates seeks to demonstrate that philosophical virtues are qualitatively

4 Frede 1999, p. 2.
5 Trabattoni 2013a.
6 *Phaedr.*, 265d–266b.

unlike common ones. But in what way did the discussion of *melete thanatou* come to deal with the virtues? Frede, whose work can nevertheless be viewed as a kind of running commentary, gives no importance to this passage and commences her analysis of lines 68c5 ff. without putting them in relation with what has been said before.[7] Yet this relation does exist, and it is extremely important for the purpose of understanding the meaning of this passage.

Socrates has just said that whoever bemoans having to die is not a *philosophos* but a *philosomatos* (lover of the body), and thus by extension also a *philochrematos* (lover of wealth) and a *philotimos* (lover of honour). Let us observe in the first place, by taking up an observation of Bruno Centrone's,[8] that the tripartite division of the soul put forward in the *Republic* is hinted at in these lines: here we indeed read that the appetitive part is *philochrematos* (580e5), the spirited part *philotimos* (581b2), and the rational part *philosophos* (581b9). This connection already leads us to guess that the underlying theoretical core in the *Phaedo* is the same as the one that is later openly laid bare in the *Republic*. If we then wanted to speculate on the association of ideas, it is possible that the division of the soul hinted at in the foregoing lines may simply have reminded Plato of the virtues associated with it. Also, it seems to be no accident that the first virtue to be quoted is *andreia* (courage): the last character mentioned in the foregoing lines is in fact the *philotimos*, namely, precisely that human type with whom the virtue of *andreia* is associated in the *Republic*.

But there is not only a purely associative link; there is also an evidently clear-cut theoretical nexus. Why does Socrates start talking about virtues so suddenly? Why does he deem it useful, or relevant, to say right at that point that the ὀνομαζομένη ἀνδρεία (so-called courage) especially befits those who are philosophically inclined (68C 5–6)? On careful scrutiny, in fact, there is nothing surprising or illogical in this passage. It is indeed wholly understandable that, just as Plato has completed what is surely one of the most ascetic descriptions of the philosopher in the dialogues, he should forthwith wish to point out that such asceticism does not adversely affect the worldly utility or the political character of philosophy in any way. And this is entirely comprehensible to those, at least, who harbour no prejudiced belief that the asceticism in the *Phaedo* and the political character of the *Republic* are two different and scarcely compatible positions. In other words, Plato may have feared that any reader who had reached that point could think that philosophy was only good for speeding up the flight from the present world towards the hereafter (that it was not an unfounded fear is confirmed by Frede's analysis summarised above).

7 Frede 1999, p. 26.
8 Centrone 2000, p. 205, n. 40.

Thus, through a transition that at this stage is only apparently abrupt, Plato emphasises that as far as the virtues are concerned, even in this case it is the philosopher who is better-placed, not the *philochrematos* or the *philotimos*. To put it briefly: at the very moment in which Plato is stressing the ascetical essence of the philosophical attitude, it is vital for him to make sure that such an attitude does not in any way jeopardise the political primacy of the philosopher and his natural inclination to rule. But there is more (we will return to it later). This clarification is not intended by Plato to merely be a prudent defensive move, as if philosophy were political after all, in spite of its ascetic character. On the contrary, the reason why the political theme issues forth at the high point of the ascetic *climax* is that Plato wants to show that philosophy is political *precisely because* it is ascetic, and to what exact extent this is so.

4 Popular and Philosophical Virtue

But for the moment, let us carry on our analysis. The expression ὀνομαζομένη ἀνδρεία finds a correspondence later on when Socrates introduces *sophrosyne* by means of an analogous limitation ("what most people call sophrosyne").[9] *Sophrosyne* consists in not allowing oneself to be overwhelmed by *epithymiai* (bodily desires). This definition is found more than once in the dialogues, often (as Centrone opportunely points out) along with the warning that it is the way in which most readers understand the term.[10] However, Socrates adds that this kind of *sophrosyne* especially befits those with scant regard for the body and who spend their lives in philosophy as well (68c11).

Up to this point, then, Plato's reasoning seems to be as follows. Putting aside the possibility that the philosopher can actually achieve a virtue befitting his condition, he is anyway able to best apply the weakest virtue as understood by the common people. Thus, it is almost mandatory to hold that the virtue of common people, assuming the philosopher does not disdain to exercise it, is nonetheless worthy of appreciation. But this qualified appreciation of popular virtue appears in clear contrast with the brief examination of *andreia* and *sophrosyne* that follows immediately afterwards. It is said here that common virtues have a singularly contradictory character, because courage and virtue as understood in this way are only practised, respectively, out of fear of evils greater than death and of losing pleasures deemed more alluring than the ones being given up. Socrates sharply concludes, therefore, that the possessor of common virtue

9 *Phaed*, 68c8–9.

10 Centrone 2000, p. 205, n. 41 (cf. *Gorg*., 491d10–e1, *Symp*., 196c4–8, and *Resp*. 389d9–e2).

is brave by reason of his cravenness, and self-restrained on the strength of his self-indulgence (68c–69a).

Thus, common virtue would now appear to be hardly worthy, and far removed from the philosopher's interests. This would seem to justify Frede's reconstruction, according to which Plato simply intends here to contrast the good virtue of the philosophers as applied to the hereafter with the bad virtue of the common people as applied to this world, with the result that there is no room for a politically-oriented philosophical virtue. And that would distinctly show how Plato in the *Phaedo* holds a flawed and unworkable concept of virtue set against the more mature virtue that will be set forth in the *Republic*.

Yet this is in sharp contrast with Socrates' words in lines 68c8–12, where the philosopher is described as the one who also best exercises "what most people call *sophrosyne*": if it deals with an utterly common and conceptually conflicting virtue that verges on becoming a vice, why is the philosopher described as one suited for the highest degree of such a virtue?

It would therefore seem necessary to look for a different explanation. In order to show that the philosopher's asceticism does not rule out the political dimension, Plato observes that philosophers are better than other human beings in practising virtues in the way they are commonly understood. These virtues are certainly well-regarded as such: it is generally admirable, in fact, not to fear death and to not let oneself be swayed by physical and material yearnings. However, if this forbearance is instrumental in a mere trade-off of one material good for another, then what at first glance seems to be a virtue immediately tums into its opposite. The self-denying person who gives up a certain physical pleasure in order to indulge in another is, in reality, downright self-indulgent, because even his alleged temperance is put to the service of intemperance.

Therefore, when Socrates says that the ὀνομαζομένη ἀνδρεία is especially suited to the philosopher, he does not mean that the philosopher practises a common virtue, but that what human beings without a doubt call virtue only actually becomes so in the light of philosophical awareness: otherwise it turns into a vice. Even if the philosopher and the non-philosopher appear to do the same thing (not fear death and refrain from pleasure), one is actually righteous while the other is dissolute.[11]

What is wrong in common virtue is not so much that the man of false moderation gives up one commodity for the sake of another valued more highly than the first. In fact, Socrates also acts in a like manner by giving up life's

11 One should not be deceived by the stoic overtones of this thesis: what makes the difference for Plato is not intention, but knowledge.

pleasures in the name of a higher state he expects to achieve after death. The man of fake intemperance makes a mistake by keeping the level of the exchange at the bottommost rung of material pleasures and pains. Hence, if the self-indulgent man is prone to be enthralled by these sorts of pleasures, the false man of moderation is certainly in no position to rise above this situation. Indeed, Socrates explains a few pages farther on that a failure to forgo bodily pleasures, pains, and yearnings does not carry the more serious consequences one might at first think of – namely, sickness or poverty – but engenders an attitude whereby only physical and material objects are truly acknowledged as real.[12] To put it another way, a hedonistic attitude is what prevents a man from becoming a philosopher.[13]

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12 *Phaed.*, 83b–c. Cf. ch. 4.

13 According to Ch. Bobonich (Bobonich 2002), one of the two main differences between common and philosophical virtue is that the latter requires that "a person aim at wisdom for its own sake" (p. 16), while the "non-philosophers have the vice of treating virtue as instrumentally good" (p. 17). I can hardly understand, however, how this statement is consistent with what Bobonich writes on p. 209 of the same book, where he says that "Plato, throughout his career including the *Laws*, held the principle of rational eudaimonism", and that "Insofar as she is rational, each person pursues her own greatest happiness for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else and she pursues everything else for the sake of her own greatest happiness. Thus, if rational agents are to be virtuous and act virtuously, virtue must contribute optimally to their own happiness". It is clear, in fact, that if "virtue must contribute optimally to their own happiness", virtue cannot require that something (in our case, wisdom) should be pursued for its own sake: whatever virtue imposes to pursue, the eudaimonist presupposition implies that it is pursued for the sake of happiness, not for the sake of the thing itself. All this is evident, besides, if we take into consideration the ethical theories which demand that virtue is pursued for its own sake, and whose hallmark is precisely that virtue cannot be subsumed to happiness (take, for instance, Kantian ethics, where the eudaimonist presupposition would turn *a priori* into *a posteriori* and the categorical imperative into the hypothetical one). In short, the eudaimonistic presupposition cannot help making of virtue an instrumental good, since it would make no sense to say that virtue is instrumental if it is pursued for the sake of pleasure (for instance) but is not if it is pursued for the sake of happiness. Therefore the difference between popular and philosophical ethics cannot be that the former is instrumental while the latter is not. The difference, as shown by the passage of the *Phaedo* just quoted, is that philosophical ethics is able to correctly identify the goods that genuinely make a human life happy, namely immaterial/spiritual goods, while popular virtue, which is addicted to the pursuit of bodily pleasures, acknowledges as real only physical and material objects that, according to Plato, are scarcely useful for happiness. For the same reason, I cannot accept F. Petrucci's suggestion (Petrucci 2018) according to which the vantage point of the philosopher's virtue is a "qualified internal state" (p. 166).

5 The Philosopher according to Plato

The nature of philosophical virtue (the only virtue worthy of the name) thus stands out in all its clarity. The philosopher believes in the existence of eternal, unchanging, and perfect objects belonging to a different dimension from the worldly (one shall concede here that no appreciable differences exist between the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*), and to these he applies all his attention and efforts. Hence, he is brave in the face of death because he *expects* that it will allow him to rejoin the object of his desire (this is expressed in both the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*), and self-restrained in the face of pleasures of the senses because his interest is directed elsewhere. In a word, he possesses the virtue of courage in the exact manner in which it is described in the *Republic*, that is to say as the virtue of one who has the right idea regarding those things which must be feared and their nature (429b–d). This obviously also involves, as expressly stated in the analogous definition in the *Laches* (194e–195a), the knowledge of things that are not to be feared. It becomes clear, therefore, why common courage cannot be regarded as such: because it does not fall within the limits of this definition. He who has the 'courage' to bear death rather than poverty, for example, shows no awareness whatsoever of what must be feared and what needn't be feared, because surely poverty is not among those things one should be afraid of. But Plato believes this kind of attitude stems from the mistaken belief that the only existing reality is material and transitory, and that this indeed causes human life (even that sort which common people assume to be virtuous) to be utterly in thrall to the paltry fear of suffering some harm at the level of things which have no consistency. Instead, the opposite belief in a reality that is actually made up of perfect and eternal things causes life to be ruled by the noble desire to merge with such a reality in some way.

One may well understand, then, why I deem Frede's interpretation of the passage not compelling. In her view, what is lacking here is that very 'virtue' which is largely the stuff of the *Republic*: common virtues are not real virtues (they are contradictory, as we have seen), while philosophical virtue is not political (it has an ascetic character, and therefore, only pertains to man's attitude towards the hereafter). Instead, as Frede always asserts, the more mature stance in the *Republic* would have the merit of focusing upon a non-conflicting political virtue (unlike the common virtue of the *Phaedo*) that is free from an otherworldly perspective (unlike the philosophical virtue of the *Phaedo*). In this way, the deep-seated contrast between the two dialogues is validated: the soul in the *Phaedo* is projected towards otherworldly dimension and is hence unwilling to practise social virtues, while the exact opposite is true in the *Republic*.

But the above analysis of the *Phaedo* passage proves this scheme to be overly simplistic. Two philosophical virtues are not found in Plato, that is to say, the ascetic virtue of the *Phaedo* and the political virtue of the *Republic*. The essentially ascetic and otherworldly nature of virtue in the *Phaedo* (which implies a concept of the soul abiding in a different dimension from the earthly) clearly translates into an attitude of detachment from the world, as well as its values and enjoyments. However paradoxical it may appear, though, the very non-involvement of the soul in earthly life is what bestows upon whoever rightly acknowledges such an inclination (the philosopher) that excellence in the political field which is discussed in the *Republic*. Failing to understand that according to Plato there is no contradiction between these two attitudes, but that on the contrary there is a precise cause/effect relationship (and hence maintaining that, according to Plato, the *Republic* is intended to correct the *Phaedo*'s asceticism), ends up in a serious misunderstanding of both dialogues. It is true that issues of an otherworldly nature are left in the background in the *Republic*, but the same cannot be said of ascetic matters. Philosophers are qualified to rule precisely because their lives are governed by an exclusive yearning to gain knowledge of ideal beings in the very same way that the *Phaedo* ascribes to them, and because they harbour no deep-seated *interest* in the pleasures of the senses or material goods.

6 The Political Relevance of Asceticism

All this emerges clearly from the entire body of work in the *Republic*, and thus requires no demonstration. But I think it is fitting to make some general reference to a few passages in Book VI in which the combination of the philosopher's asceticism with his political nature is laid bare and stripped of any paradoxical facets. First of all, philosophical natures are those whose love of knowledge relates to what always exists and is not prone to birth or decay (485a10–b3). This penchant that, at first glimpse, would seem to drive the philosopher out of the city-state is really the necessary premise that spawns a range of virtues with relatively immediate and clear political relevance: Truthfulness (485c3–4); Temperance (485d6–e6); Magnanimity (486a1–10); Courage, especially when facing death (486b1–4); and Justice (486b7–8), besides intellectual qualities such as a readiness to learn and Moderation (486c–487a).

Let it also be noted that, at the end of this list, Socrates makes Glaucon expressly acknowledge that all the qualities listed must hinge on the fact that the philosophical soul partakes of "(true) being": "Have we not proved the qualities enumerated to be necessary and compatible with one another for the soul

that is to have a sufficient and perfect apprehension of reality (τοῦ ὄντος, which clearly hints at the Forms)?" (tr. Shorey, 486e1–3). This is no casual reminder of the need for consequentiality. Arguing against the representation whereby the philosopher's exclusive interest in those immobile and non-becoming realities (which are evidently non-existent in worldly experience) would bestow a fundamentally impolitic ascetic vocation upon him, Plato forcefully claims the exact opposite to be true. Indeed, it is precisely the ascetic character of his way of life, in turn brought about by the otherworldly nature of the objects of his desire, which equips him with true political virtues, and especially with a courage and temperance (to recall the parallel analysis in the *Phaedo*) that do not turn into their own opposites.

Plato is well aware of the difficulty in demonstrating the nexus between the philosopher's bent towards an other-worldly dimension and the political side of his nature, as it runs utterly against common sense. In fact, as soon as Socrates has drawn up his list of the philosopher's political virtues, he makes Adeimantus talk about the typical misgivings of the common mindset (487bff.). From the standpoint of logical reasoning there would appear to be nothing untoward, but one finds in practice that many who put off studying philosophy until they are no longer young become 'twisted' (*allokotoi*, 487d2), not to say utter rascals. In order to allay this impression, Socrates will have to clarify the metaphysical and dualistic structure of reality: as the cave allegory shows, the philosopher's asceticism is only perceived as a mark of difference and oddness (and hence of gross clumsiness when facing tasks of a political nature) by those whose warped views keeps them from believing in a dimension above the worldly one. On the other hand, once permanently settled into this stance, the philosopher's political nature is no longer a problem, nor is it a matter to be justified with any effort, but rather becomes a feature of his nature, albeit not expressly desired.[14]

7 Conclusion

I think that all this is clear enough already in the *Phaedo*. One might even share Frede's observation that Plato in this dialogue would be exercising a rather summary criticism against the popular virtues. Yet this is not enough to mark out significant differences between the two dialogues on the topic we are discussing. Frede writes that it is true enough that the grounds upon which common

14 It is well known that the philosophers depicted in the *Republic* have no desire to rule (cf. 473a, 499b, 500d).

human beings establish courageous or self-restrained modes of behaviour cannot be relegated to a seedy trade of pains and pleasures, and that there might be "non-philosophers", for example, who are brave in the face of death out of a "yearning for honour" (*Ehrliebe*).[15] This does not lessen the fact that the *philotimos* in the *Republic* (although, as we have seen, there is also a clear hint to this effect in the *Phaedo*) is kept well apart from the *philosophos* inasmuch as only the philosopher possesses virtue in its truest sense. In other words, there is full agreement between the two dialogues in claiming that virtue in its fullest sense can only be assigned to those who believe in metaphysical realities and have no other desire than to know them. If virtue is knowledge of fearsome and desirable things, the man that is brave only out of a yearning for honor, will surely not show that he possesses it. In the Platonic doctrine of the soul and its virtues there is a striking paradox that deserves to be carefully clarified in order to avoid it being mistaken for a flagrant and trivial contradiction: that the soul and its virtues only attain an adequate political dimension at the very moment in which the contrary evidence seems stronger. In other words, according to Plato, philosophy is all the more political the more ascetic it is. Indeed, one of the main ambitions of Plato's philosophy is to reveal the sound reasoning behind what appears paradoxical or bizarre to the non-philosophical mind.

Does this mean the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* are in agreement with regard to the destiny of the soul and the essence of its virtues? Obviously not. We have already acknowledged that, in the *Republic*, the field of non-philosophical behaviour extends to semi-virtues that do not simply tum into wickeder vices (e.g. the virtues of the *philotimos*). Furthermore, it is clear that the soul's otherworldly bent (that nevertheless is not denied, as the myth of Er shows) plays a somewhat eccentric role in the *Republic* and is less closely linked to the handling of the virtues than in the *Phaedo*. Still, these discrepancies are to be ascribed more to a difference of points of view than to a substantial theoretical rift.

The idea that, by necessary implication, an otherworldly bent, an ascetic attitude, and a natural possession of political virtues all converge in the philosopher lies at the heart of Platonic thought, without palpable differences between the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. Having said this, it is quite understandable that the philosopher's asceticism and his hope that, in abandoning his body, his soul will gain access to a better life are brought to the fore in the *Phaedo*,[16] whose main thrust is to justify Socrates' behaviour (especially his

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15 Frede 1999, p. 28.

16 This particular slant in the *Phaedo*, i.e. that its main purpose was to defend the moral figure of the eudaimonist philosopher (here portrayed by Socrates) from the "performative

decision to do nothing to shun death). Also, it is equally understandable that the subject of the political only draws forth a few veiled hints. Likewise, by the same token it is just as reasonable that the exact opposite occurs in the *Republic*.

contradiction" that this might bring about, has been accurately highlighted by Norbert Blössner (Blössner 2001). This, however, leads us to the idea that in the *Phaedo* "der Figur Socrates repräsentiere entweder den Dialogautor oder seinen Lehrer", whereas it "sich primär aus den Erfordernissen des Darstellungziels ergeben" (p. 135). And this interpretation of the "dialogical approach" (Blössner expressly rejects the *Selbstvertretenhese*, or what is known as the "Mouthpiece Theory" in the English-speaking world) seems hardly acceptable to me. It is true that Plato's thought cannot normally be inferred from the utterances of his Socrates; but one cannot gainsay that Plato also sought to voice his own opinions through his writings. And if we wish to reconstruct these opinions, it is necessary to mediate between the various dialogues, in the awareness that every one of them will express his opinions in a largely one-sided manner. For sure, one ought not to assume that the theses put forward in certain dialogues are "ganz unabhängig von der persönlichen Überzeugungen des Autors" (p. 120). What is the goal of a philosophical writer, if not that of conveying his beliefs? Instead, I fully agree with Christopher Rowe's stance in an essay published in the same collection (Rowe 2001, pp. 34–47): a holistic and highly non-dogmatic approach to Plato's text does not rule out that, insofar (and as long) as his arguments hold, he may have been sure of the truth of specific theses. And among the latter, one can surely count the immortality of the soul (p. 46), as well as an essential separation of body and soul (nowhere as deep-seated as in the *Phaedo*).

CHAPTER 4

The (True) Philosopher

1 Sokratismusstreit

The first volume of Gabriele Giannantoni's *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae* includes a most helpful section entitled *Loci platonici qui ad socraticos philosophos pertinere visi sunt*, which features an extensive bibliography on authors and works relevant to the study of these possible relations.[1] It becomes immediately evident that Antisthenes is by far the most widely cited name. However, from the bibliographical references it is also possible to infer that this kind of hunt for Antisthenic allusions was especially *en vogue* at the turn of the 20th century,[2] after which the interest in such problems greatly declined. The reasons for this change are clear enough. On the one hand, historico-philological criticism became increasingly cautious, and more demanding from the point of view of textual evidence: generic allusions or vague verbal resemblances are no longer considered sufficient evidence to prove the existence of a direct relationship. On the other hand, enquiries on ancient philosophers have come to focus more on the contents of their thought and on the logical-rational structure of the arguments underpinning it. By contrast, erudite efforts to find precise historical confirmation have lessened to some extent – not least because much (perhaps too much) has already been said on this topic, particularly during the above-mentioned period, and it seems unlikely that any significant advances are to be made now. Rather, what seems more pressing nowadays is the need to critically examine the wide range of material collected, so as to verify where and to what degree any identified correspondences are most likely to hold good.

However, it must also be said that over time our knowledge of the Socratics' philosophies has considerably increased both in breadth and in depth, making it both more interesting and more feasible to compare the various 'Socratisms' – starting from Plato's, of course – on the properly philosophical level. This is especially true for Antisthenes. Not only can we now rely

1 Giannantoni 1990, vol. I, p. 358–373.
2 See esp. Joël 1893–1901.

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on some excellent studies about this author, both general and more specific ones,[3] but it also seems most likely that an enquiry motivated by philosophical (or historico-philosophical) requirements can yield very interesting results precisely in terms of the relationship between Plato and this Socratic thinker. This is not due merely to the oft-noted fact that Antisthenes was the only pupil of Socrates' to remain in Athens after his teacher's death.[4] Judging from what knowledge is currently available, it seems as though Antisthenes' thought constitutes not just an elaborate and compact interpretation of Socratism, but also one sharply alternative to Plato's interpretation. Therefore, it is no longer so much a matter of evaluating – on the basis of objective data – whether and where Plato sought to engage in a direct polemic with Antisthenes: objectivity of this sort is hardly attainable.[5] Rather, it is a matter of evaluating, from a more general perspective, whether Plato modelled certain aspects of his thought in such a way as to develop a picture of Socratism that differed from the one painted by other Socratics, particularly Antisthenes. In other words, I would argue that in the early decades of the 4th century the heirs to Socrates' teaching waged a bitter battle not so much – or not only – in the name of a controversial faithfulness to their master, but rather in favour of a given conception of philosophy, which could be identified precisely through a correct interpretation of Socrates' thought. This hypothesis also makes it possible to gain a deeper understanding of certain themes in Platonic philosophy, without forcing us to conclude that the ultimate purpose of such aspects is to polemically engage with Antisthenes.

This possibility depends on the fact that Plato, in my view, never abandoned his intention of being a 'Socratic' philosopher. He conceived his philosophy not so much as a crucial overcoming of Socratism, through the development of a different doctrine from that of his teacher (and possibly in clear contrast with it on certain points), but rather as the explicit formulation of ideas implicitly present in Socrates' own thought. In his view, these ideas, once consistently developed, ought to lead to a series of theses that – historically and literally speaking – were 'non-Socratic', yet necessary to fully bring out the truth implicit in Socrates' own thought.[6] Precisely for this reason, in my

3 Particularly commendable, in the present writer's eyes, are the many works which Aldo Brancacci has devoted to Antisthenes.

4 According to Diogenes Laertius (III, 6) immediately after Socrates' death Plato moved to Megara with other Socratics.

5 Significantly, Ch. Balla (2021) has been very cautious in formulating his hypotheis that Antisthenes might be the real target of Socrates' polemic against the antilogicians in the *Phaedo*.

6 The contrast between Socrates and Plato, which in the dialogues is represented by the double presence of a 'Socratic' Socrates and a Platonic one, has found a classic and influential

view, the polemic against other variants of Socratism was not a petty battle that Plato waged in an effort to lay claim to his teacher's legacy, but rather provided the testing ground on which the fate of philosophy was played out. Put very briefly, Plato wished to highlight the unexpressed metaphysical context which Socrates' teaching presupposed, whereas what distinguished Antisthenes' Socratism was precisely the fact that any such context was wholly absent. In an approximate and preliminary way, we can articulate this difference on two levels. Correctly understood, Socratic questioning not only promotes ἐπίσκεψις τῶν ὀνομάτων ("enquiry on names/words", with everything it entails),[7] but must also lead one to identify the existence of metaphysical principles that are at once the ultimate aim of philosophical enquiry and the assumption which makes name-giving possible.[8] Care of the soul, and the pursuit of happiness inextricably connected to it, cannot consist merely in the judicious selection of sensory pleasures, but must also lead to the determination of spiritual values which have some metaphysical consistency, and which are thus capable of establishing themselves as a qualitatively alternative universe with respect to the material one.

This second point, which will be the focus of the present study, can further be brought into focus by examining the concept of 'proper' (οἰκεῖον). Since in the logical-epistemological sphere Antisthenes uses the formula οἰκεῖος λόγος (the thing's own *logos*) and since in the ethical sphere he denounces the difference between οἰκεῖα ('proper') and ἀλλότρια ('belonging to another'),[9] the term οἰκεῖον ('proper') has been repeatedly understood as a marker of Plato's polemic against the Socratic. From the perspective of the ethical use of the term,[10] which is what we are concerned with here, the points of reference

expression in Gregory Vlastos' studies, esp. Vlastos 1991 (in Italy – as we shall see later on – a similar perspective has been adopted by Gabriele Giannantoni: see for instance Giannantoni 1993). I have voiced some objections in Trabattoni 1993 and 1996. One interesting implication of the problem concerns contemporary reinterpretations of Platonic thought. Vlastos' distinction is related to the hypothesis according to which Socrates' thought was chiefly problematic, whereas Plato's was chiefly dogmatic. Thus an anti-dogmatic reinterpretation of Plato such as the one suggested by Hans-Georg Gadamer can be regarded, on the one hand, as a 're-Socratisation' of Plato (Renaud 1999) and, on the other, as an interpretation of Socratic, rather than Platonic, thought (Filippi 2003). It is no coincidence that Filippi accepts the rather dogmatic picture of Plato drawn by scholars of the Tübingen-Milan school.

7 See Brancacci 1990, esp. pp. 119–146.

8 I have mentioned a possible polemic conducted against Antisthenes by Plato in relation to this topic in Trabattoni 2004, esp. pp. 174–176.

9 Epict. *Diss.*, III 24.68 = 118 Decleva Caizzi = V B 22 Giannantoni = Prince 34E.

10 Concerning the relevance of the οἰκεῖος λόγος regarding Antisthenes' opposition to Plato from the epistemological point of view, see Suvák 2018, pp. 146–150.

are dialogues such as *Charmides*, *Lysis*, and *Symposium*.[11] Elsewhere I have already discussed the possible traces of a polemic against Antisthenes in these dialogues.[12] Here I will instead examine certain passages from the *Phaedo* in which a similar background is present, in my view, even though the theme of οἰκεῖος is not mentioned explicitly.

2 The True Philosopher: The Identity between Theory and Practice

According to the above-mentioned list by Giannantoni, the possible references to Antisthenes in the *Phaedo* that have been recorded in the literature are: 68c–69b, 72e–73b, 79a–b, 81b, and 103a. However, only in the first of these passages does the possible correspondence occur in the sphere of ethics. We will be discussing this case later on. I believe it is more fruitful to set out from a broader observation. As is widely known, the properly philosophical part of the dialogue begins when Socrates asks Cebes to tell Evenus that he would do well to come after him as soon as possible, if he is a philosopher (61c). To make sense of this bizarre invitation, which elicits an amused reaction from Simmias (see chapter 2), Socrates repeatedly asserts that the philosopher neither bemoans (ἀγανακτεῖν: 62e6, 63b9, 63c5, 64a8, 67e2, 67e9, 68b1, 68b9 69e1) nor fears death (δεδιέναι: 77d7, 77e6, 78b9, 88b7; φοβέω and cognate terms: 67e6, 67e9, 68b6, 84b4, 95d6), but on the contrary faces it with courage (θάρρειν: 63e10, 78b9, 87e6, 88b4, 95c2, 114d8). Most importantly, Socrates must show what the nature of the *true* philosopher is, which enables him to possess the above-mentioned qualities. Significantly, Plato makes repeated use of expressions such as:

– "a man who has genuinely spent his life in philosophy" (ἀνὴρ τῷ ὄντι ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ διατρίψας τὸν βίον, 63e9–10)
– "those who correctly engage in philosophy" (ὅσοι τυγχάνουσιν ὀρθῶς ἁπτόμενοι φιλοσοφίας, 64a4–5)
– "true philosophers" (οἱ ὡς ἀληθῶς φιλόσοφοι, 64b9)
– "he's truly a philosopher" (ὅ γε ὡς ἀληθῶς φιλόσοφος, 64e2)
– "those who are genuinely philosophers" (τοῖς γνησίως φιλοσόφοις, 66b2)
– "those who really love wisdom" (οἱ φιλοσοφοῦντες ὀρθῶς, 67d8)
– "those who truly love wisdom" (οἱ ὀρθῶς φιλοσοφοῦντες, 67e4)

11 See Giannantoni 1990, I 359, 370.
12 Trabattoni 2004, pp. 162–171.

– "a soul [which] pursues philosophy correctly (ἣ [ψυχὴ] ὀρθῶς φιλοσοφοῦσα, 81a1)
– "those who truly love wisdom" (οἱ ὀρθῶς φιλόσοφοι, 82c2–3)
– "the soul of the true philosopher" (ἡ τοῦ ὡς ἀληθῶς φιλοσόφου ψυχή, 83b5–6);

to which we should also add:

– "all those who truly love learning" (τοὺς ὀρθῶς φιλομαθεῖς, 67b4)
– "the proper lovers of learning" (οἱ δικαίως φιλομαθεῖς, 83e5).

The author's insistence on these adverbial forms is almost obsessive, and might seem superfluous, were it not that Plato here also aims to draw a contrast between Socrates, who is a *true* philosopher, and others, who are not (and who therefore are *false* philosophers). My hypothesis is that Plato primarily has Antisthenes in mind here.[13] Given that according to Plato – in perfect keeping with that Socratic spirit which Antisthenes too must have cherished – philosophy develops through the close interconnection between a theoretical and a practical level, Plato's polemic unfolds precisely on these two levels. In Plato's view, the value of certain practical behaviours is closely connected to the degree of knowledge possessed by the people performing them. The negative nature of certain actions reveals a degree of theoretical ignorance in those responsible for them that is directly proportional to the negativity produced. Conversely, an agent can accomplish positive effects on the practical level exactly to the degree that he possesses the corresponding theoretical knowledge. What is at work here is a technical model which occurs throughout the Platonic corpus, particularly in its Socratic phase: a model that Plato can be seen to invariably apply to ethics, provided – of course – that it is understood not as a sort of algorithm capable of infallibly leading one to the good life, but as a regulatory model for ethical action (for although there is no such thing as infallible knowledge, it is true that the more knowledge we possess, the greater our hope of success is).[14]

If this is the case, the distinction between true and false philosophy can be conducted on two closely interconnected levels: a bad theory is bound to

13 Obviously, this does not exclude that Plato may have had other figures in mind too. However, there is no reason to dwell on the matter, since the aim of this chapter is not to paint a complete picture of Plato's polemical targets, but only to show that the reference to Antisthenes is supported by solid arguments.

14 Cf. *Euth*. 282a.

produce bad actions, and bad actions unerringly reveal their perpetrators' bad theory. By contrast to what Giannantoni believes, I would argue that no difference between Plato and Socrates can be established with regard to this point, based on the assumption that the former subjected practice to theory by subordinating "passions to the desires and dictates of knowledge", whereas the latter posited the unity of theory and practice "as the condition whereby man can desire and put into practice only what he acknowledges as his own good, so that once he attains knowledge of the true good, he is bound to realise it."[15] Plato actually shares this Socratic principle completely, but believes that knowledge of the true good, which forces one to enact such a good, concerns something metaphysical. And it is precisely in relation to this problem that Antisthenes' philosophy – which lacked any metaphysical scope – proved a bad philosophy, which is to say a false and incorrect way of interpreting Socrates' thought. In my view, Plato in the *Phaedo* is also seeking to expose this 'badness' of Antisthenes' philosophy, by resorting to proofs and counter-proofs: the proofs lie in the weakness of Antisthenes' theoretical assumptions; the counter-proofs in the incapacity of these assumptions to promote the good life.

Given this convergence of theory and practice, Socrates' very behaviour gives the lie to Antisthenes' interpretation of Socratism, while revealing the truth of Plato's interpretation: for Socrates was only able to act as he did on the basis of metaphysical assumptions that eluded Antisthenes. Therefore, precisely because it is only in the light of these assumptions that Socrates' life and death could acquire a coherent meaning, Plato felt fully justified in making them explicit – even though, in all likelihood, the historical Socrates had never discussed such assumptions. After all, it is here that the ultimate meaning of the *Phaedo* lies, which is to say of the kind of second defence speech that Plato has Socrates deliver before his friends on the last day of his life. The metaphysical background which this dialogue brings out is intended precisely to preserve the coherence of Socrates' eudaimonism and the correctness of his reasoning: without it, Socrates risked coming across as being exactly the same as the cowardly philosopher that Callicles speaks of in the *Gorgias*, a philosopher who suffers the evil of death at his enemies' hands without being able to defend himself (see chapter 2). In other words, according to Plato, Socrates' practical behaviour – especially his serene attitude to death – can only be understood and elevated to the status of a norm in the light of the metaphysical doctrines he attributes to his teacher, whereas this behaviour becomes wholly

15 Giannantoni 1990, vol. IV, p. 391.

unexplainable, and unrepeatable, in the light of a theoretically poor philosophy such as Antisthenes'.

3 Antisthenes and the Use of Pleasures: From Xenophon's *Symposium* to Plato's *Gorgias*

Let us start, then, by ascertaining what exactly makes Antisthenes' Socratism weak on a theoretical level. To this end, we may set out from a testimony that can be gleaned from Xenophon's *Symposium*:[16]

> "Come, now, Antisthenes," said Socrates, "take your turn and tell us how it is that with such slender means you base your pride on wealth."
>
> Because, sirs, I conceive that people's wealth and poverty are to be found not in their real estate but in their hearts [but the Greek has ψυχαί, 'souls',]. [35] For I see many persons, not in office, who though possessors of large resources, yet look upon themselves as so poor that they bend their backs to any toil, any risk, if only they may increase their holdings; and again I know of brothers, with equal shares in their inheritance, where one of them has plenty, and more than enough to meet expenses, while the other is in utter want. [36] Again, I am told of certain despots, also, who have such a greedy appetite for riches that they commit much more dreadful crimes than they who are afflicted with the direst poverty. For it is of course their want that makes some people steal, others commit burglary, others follow the slave trade; but there are some despots who destroy whole families, kill human beings wholesale, oftentimes enslave even entire cities, for the sake of money. [37] As for such human beings, I pity them deeply for their malignant disease (τῆς ἄγαν χαλεπῆς νόσου); for in my eyes their malady resembles that of a person who possessed abundance but though continually eating could never be satisfied. For my own part, my possessions are so great that I can hardly find them myself; yet I have enough so that I can eat until I reach a point where I no longer feel hungry and drink until I do not feel thirsty and have enough clothing so that when out of doors I do not feel the cold any more than my superlatively wealthy friend Callias here; [38] and when I get into the house I look on my walls as exceedingly warm tunics and the roofs as exceptionally thick mantles; and the bedding that I own is so satisfactory

16 Xenoph. *Symp.* 4.34–44 = 117 Decleva Caizzi = V A 82 Giannantoni = 82 Prince.

> that it is actually a hard task to get me awake in the morning. If I ever feel a natural desire for converse with women, I am so well satisfied with whatever chance puts in my way that those to whom I make my addresses are more than glad to welcome me because they have no one else who wants to consort with them. [39] In a word, all these items appeal to me as being so conducive to enjoyment that I could not pray for greater pleasure in performing any one of them, but could pray rather for less – so much more pleasurable do I regard some of them than is good for one. [40] But the most valuable parcel of my wealth I reckon (λογίζομαι) to be this, that even though someone were to rob me of what I now possess, I see no occupation so humble that it would not give me adequate fare. [41] For whenever I feel an inclination to indulge my appetite, I do not buy fancy articles at the market (for they come high), but I draw on the store-house of my soul (ἐκ τῆς ψυχῆς ταμιεύομαι). And it goes a long way farther towards producing enjoyment when I take food only after awaiting the craving for it than when I partake of one of these fancy dishes, like this fine Thasian wine that fortune has put in my way and I am drinking without the promptings of thirst. [42] Yes, and it is natural that those whose eyes are set on frugality should be more honest than those whose eyes are fixed on money-making. For those who are most contented with what they have are least likely to covet what belongs to others. [43] And it is worth noting that wealth of this kind makes people generous, also. My friend Socrates here and I are examples. For Socrates, from whom I acquired this wealth of mine, did not come to my relief with limitation of number and weight, but made over to me all that I could carry. And as for me, I am now niggardly to no one, but both make an open display of my abundance to all my friends and share my spiritual wealth [again the Greek has 'soul': τοῦ ἐν τῇ ἐμῇ ψυχῇ πλούτου] with any one of them that desires it. [44] But – most exquisite possession of all! – you observe that I always have leisure, with the result that I can go and see whatever is worth seeing, and hear whatever is worth hearing and – what I prize highest – pass the whole day, untroubled by business, in Socrates' company. Like me, he does not bestow his admiration on those who count the most gold, but spends his time with those who are congenial to him.
>
> Such was the thesis maintained by Antisthenes. (tr. E. C. Marchant)

Antisthenes is seen to spurn bodily goods in favour of the soul. The term 'soul' occurs three times in this passage. Actually, though, it is never filled with any real content. Antisthenes only displays a moderately ascetic stance, by refraining from unattainable pleasures and resting content with those he can more

realistically and easily attain (hence Epictetus' praise in the passage from the *Discourses* mentioned above).[17] No clear-cut distinction is drawn between two qualitatively different goods, namely those of the body and those of the soul: the goods of the soul simply amount to a compression of those of the body.

To confirm this, let us analyse certain points raised by Xenophon's testimony. In this text too, as in the *Gorgias*, a rather explicit contrast is drawn between the philosopher and the tyrant, and the latter's condition is compared to that of someone suffering from a serious sickness. In the *Gorgias*, for instance, Socrates disputes Polus' idea that the tyrant Archelaus is 'happy', as long as he can avoid punishment for his misdeeds, by describing him instead as someone who while being "the victim of the worst diseases should contrive not to submit to the doctor's penalty for his bodily transgressions" (479a5–b1, tr. Lamb). The comparison makes it clear that by acting in such a way, the tyrant behaves most foolishly, to his own detriment rather than benefit. Clearly, all of this must be understood in the light of the eudaimonistic ethics which Socrates endorses in the *Gorgias*: the tyrant's 'badness' is due, first of all, to the fact that, by acting as he does, he is incapable of attaining that good to which all human beings aspire, namely happiness. Evidently, the 'Socratic' Antisthenes has the same ethical orientation. He too stigmatises tyrants' misdeeds, by recalling for instance that they "commit burglary", or "follow the slave trade", and that "there are some despots who "destroy whole families, kill human beings wholesale, oftentimes enslave even entire cities, for the sake of money" (36). According to Xenophon's Socrates, as much as the Socrates of the *Gorgias*, the negative aspect of this behaviour shows that such actions lead to 'sickness', not happiness. However, when it comes to identifying the reason for this sickness, Antisthenes has nothing to say except that the tyrant resembles "a person who possessed abundance but though continually eating could never be satisfied" (37). Correlatively, the positive model which Antisthenes sets in contrast to that of the tyrant is the model of someone – i.e. Antisthenes himself – who knows how to make sufficiently intelligent use of bodily pleasures to be satiated. Everything that Antisthenes says about himself in the subsequent lines simply serves this purpose: he eats and drinks in such a way as to be satiated, his modest attire and poor home are quite enough for him, and even as far as the pleasures of love are concerned, he knows how to make do with what is readily available. This being the case, we must conclude that the tyrant would be beyond reproof if his bad actions were enough to satisfy his sensible desires. Indeed, the goods of the soul to which Antisthenes would be alluding wholly

17 Cf. n. 9.

coincide with a selection of bodily goods that is accurate enough to ensure that they will provide 'satiety'.

Now, it is true that in the *Gorgias* too Socrates opposes the dissolute pleasure of the tyrannical man by objecting that it is an insatiable pleasure (493d–494a). But it is equally true that in the following pages Socrates variously attempts to prove to his interlocutor that pleasure cannot be identified with the good, by initially carrying out an assessment that is entirely limited to sensory pleasures. However, the ethical conception which emerges in this dialogue is strongly marked by the distinction between bodily goods and goods of the soul, which Socrates first enunciates in his discussion with Polus (starting at 464a), and then recalls in his discussion with Callicles (501b). This distinction is formulated in such terms as to effectively identify two different spheres and objects. Consider, for instance, how Socrates brings this distinction to Polus' attention for the first time (464a1). Here, through a 'question about existence' of the sort that is typical of the Platonic Socrates,[18] Polus is asked whether "there are things… that you call body and soul?" I believe that this is a noteworthy detail. Socrates is not merely alluding to the soul or its treasures in a generic way, but wishes to have his interlocutor grant that the soul is *truly something*. Therefore, if we believe that the soul is superior to the body (and it would be difficult to deny that this is the case), then we have somehow demonstrated the need for the care of the soul, understood as a specific activity concerning a reality that is sharply different from the corporeal one. Only in the light of a marked ontological distinction such as that just enunciated, can Socrates prove to Callicles that two different forms of life exist (500a–b), and that the life devoted to the care of the soul has its own particular features and contents.

These contents coincide with virtues, which in turn find expression in concepts such as those of order and measure. In 506d7 Plato speaks of τάξις (order, disposition), ὀρθότης (rightness), and τέχνη (art, science), whereas in 506e1–2 he infers that the virtue of each thing is "a matter of regular and orderly arrangement". Finally, in the following line he introduces the notion of κόσμος (order), through a question apparently intended to raise the suspicion that Plato here is keen to polemically engage with Antisthenes: "hence it is a certain order (κόσμος) proper (οἰκεῖος) to each existent thing that by its advent in each makes it good?" (506e2–4). The good proper to a particular thing – Socrates explains – is to be found in the order pertaining to this thing. And since the soul is something other than the body, there must be an order of the soul such as to constitute its own proper good, which clearly differs from the goods pertaining to other

18 See Trabattoni 2016, esp. pp. 201–204.

spheres (particularly bodily goods). Plato will also discuss this idea of order as the proper good of the soul in the *Republic* (where it is summed up through the concept of *oikeiopragia*), reinforcing his conception through a sophisticated psychological doctrine that is not to be found in the *Gorgias*. However, this is not the place to discuss this issue. What matters here is the hypothesis that Plato, in this and other dialogues, aimed to criticise Antisthenes because of his inconsistency in having correctly identified the good with the 'proper', and of having clearly alluded to a difference between goods of the soul and bodily goods, while at the same time reducing the good of the soul to the judicious use of bodily goods, without being able to identify any good that is really 'proper' to the soul. In other words, while promising to direct man towards a dimension different from the corporeal one, Antisthenes' philosophy ultimately amounts to a judicious form of hedonism – where terms such as *psyche*, *philosophia*, *phronesis*, and *sophia* have no other content except this 'judiciousness'.

I realise that it might seem somewhat of a provocation to describe Antisthenes as a hedonist (albeit a judicious one), particularly in the light of that part of the doxographical tradition which focuses on his asceticism and rejection of pleasures. Actually, the problem is not as serious as it may seem, and in my view has already been solved in a satisfactory way by Aldo Brancacci.[19] First of all, he notes that not all testimonies on Antisthenes carry the same weight, and that it is a good idea to set out from "the earliest and most reliable texts, starting from the famous speech delivered by Antisthenes in Xenophon's *Symposium*".[20] Conversely – as Brancacci notes again – the testimonies documenting Antisthenes' anti-hedonistic polemic are few and far between, and they all come from late sources that are not well-informed about our philosopher.[21] Having said this, if an anti-hedonistic polemic is really to be found in relation to Antisthenes, it is directed "not towards pleasure, but against pleasure that is immoderate, excessive, and hence a cause of suffering".[22] What remains to be clarified is whether Antisthenes truly limited the goods of the soul and the exercising of philosophy to the judicious use of bodily pleasures.

Now, it seems to me that a reproach of this sort was far from unjustified, at least coming from a philosopher who reasoned as Plato did. Consider, for instance, what Antisthenes states in § 41 of Xenophon's text. Antisthenes claims that when he wishes to attain pleasure, he does not buy it at a steep price at the market, but draws on the store-house of the soul. But what does

19 Brancacci 1993, pp. 35–55.
20 Ibid., p. 37.
21 Ibid., p. 50.
22 Ibid., p. 46.

this mean? As becomes clear from the subsequent lines, what Antisthenes draws from the store-house of the soul is simply the capacity to attain a greater pleasure than any costly one through conscious abstinence (precisely because this defers satisfaction). Therefore, the soul is only introduced as a psychological device to ensure that affordable pleasures will be at least as satisfying as ones that are costly (and harder to obtain). Something more can possibly be inferred from the final lines of Antisthenes' speech, where the Socratic philosopher mentions his privilege of being able to exploit his σχολή (leisure) to "see whatever is worth seeing, and hear whatever is worth hearing". With Brancacci, we may perhaps conclude that these intellectual gratifications coincided with those pleasures of the soul that distinguished Antisthenes' position from Aristippus'.[23] However, it would make sense for Plato to regard an aim of this sort as being hardly capable of identifying goods proper to the soul that are qualitatively different from those of the body. Ultimately, in this case too Antisthenes was referring to a judicious selection of pleasures of the senses, particularly those pertaining to sight and hearing; therefore, in Plato's eyes, his attitude must have seemed more similar to that of a refined and demanding *philodox* than to the attitude of a true philosopher.

4 Antisthenes in the *Phaedo*

On the basis of what has been argued so far, let us return to the *Phaedo*. An early allusion to Antisthenes might be found in the passage (already included in Giannantoni's list) in which Socrates stigmatises the false self-restraint of those who are self-restrained out of self-indulgence (68e–69b), that is to say: the 'self-restraint' of those who refrain from certain pleasures so as not to be deprived of others (see chapter 3). These people – Socrates goes on to say – understand virtues as "the exchanging of pleasures for pleasures, pains for pains and fear for fear, greater for less, like currencies", whereas they do not take any account of the only coinage of any worth, namely wisdom (φρόνησις). Indeed, in Socratic-Platonic terms, wisdom is not merely what enables a correct assessment of bodily pleasures, but also what makes it possible to discover goods of the soul that are superior to them, and hence worthier of being pursued. And this second aspect is precisely the crucial feature of Socrates' ethics that Antisthenes missed.

23 Ibid., p. 43.

The whole argument becomes even clearer in 82e–83c:

> The lovers of learning are aware that when philosophy takes over their soul, the soul really is bound thoroughly in the body and stuck to it, and is forced to consider the real things through it as if through a cage, and not on its own through itself, and that it drifts in utter ignorance. And philosophy observes the cleverness of the prison – that it works through desire, the best way to make the prisoner himself assist in his imprisonment. Anyway, as I was saying, the lovers of learning are aware that the soul is in this condition when philosophy takes it over, and that philosophy gently reassures it and attempts to release it by showing that inquiry conducted through the eyes is full of deceit, as is likewise inquiry conducted through the ears and through the other senses. Philosophy, they are aware, persuades the soul to distance itself from the senses, except to the extent that use of them is necessary, and encourages the soul to collect and gather itself alone into itself, and to trust nothing but itself, concerning whichever real thing, alone by itself, the soul has intelligence of, when the soul too is alone by itself. Philosophy, they are also aware, encourages the soul not to regard as true anything else that the soul considers by other means and in other things, and to believe that, whereas this latter kind of thing is perceptible and visible, what the soul itself sees is intelligible and unseen. Now the soul of the true philosopher thinks that it should not oppose this release, and that is why it refrains from pleasures, desires, pains and fears as much as it can: it reckons that when someone experiences intense pleasure, pain, fear or desire, they do not inflict on him the minor injuries one might assume (for example, falling ill or wasting money because of his desires) but that they inflict on him the greatest and most extreme of all evils, without it even appearing in his reckoning.
>
> 'What is that, Socrates?' said Cebes.
>
> It's that the soul of every human being, when it experiences intense pleasure or pain at something, is forced to believe at that moment that whatever particularly gives rise to that feeling is most self-evidently real,
>
> when it isn't so. These are above all visible things, aren't they?
>
> 'Certainly.'

After having illustrated what the aim is for the souls of true philosophers (83b1–2), an aim which leads them to neglect pleasures and desires as far as possible (b5–7), Socrates warns his interlocutor that for the true philosopher the soul given over to such pleasures suffers not so much "the minor injuries one might assume", namely sickness or loss of money due to excessive desire,

but a different and more serious evil. The sickness which Socrates alludes to is bound to recall the tyrant's sickness mentioned by Antisthenes in the Xenophon passage (IV, 37); but Socrates notes that this sickness, i.e. insatiability, is not the most serious one afflicting those who devote their lives to pleasures. Hence, people like Antisthenes, who do not see any other kind of damage to the hedonist's life, are dead wrong. The true damage and the true evil, as the following line explains, consist in believing that sensible reality is the only reality which truly exists. For the soul that is fully immersed in feelings of happiness and pain, and acts as though these variables were the only true motivations for its existence, this condition will necessarily go hand in hand with the belief that the reality on account of which it experiences these feelings is the most evident and truest, whereas this is not the case (83c5–8).[24] Nor, we might add, does it make any difference whether pleasures are enjoyed senselessly, as in the tyrant's case, or judiciously, as in Antisthenes' case.

Indeed, the conscious judiciousness with which Antisthenes measured and compared bodily pleasures, by drawing on the "store-house of the soul" (and hence all his wisdom), in order to optimise material satisfaction, is even more dangerous than thoughtless hedonism: for those who act like Antisthenes not only explicitly show that they do not believe in the existence of anything higher, but also fall under the illusion that they are practising philosophy, when in fact they are denying its very existence. The vulgar hedonist, by contrast, does not practise philosophy and hence implicitly does not rule out that philosophy might exist as something totally foreign to his way of thinking and acting. Here too it is possible to highlight a clear textual reference (although I believe it would be unwarranted to assign too much importance to correspondences of this sort). As we have seen, Antisthenes did not act in an instinctive manner, but resorted to reason, carefully reckoning things. This 'reckoning' is clearly expressed by the use of λογίζομαι in *Symp*. 4. 40. Plato frequently uses this verb not only with the technical meaning of 'to reckon', but also with the broader one of 'to reason' (for reasoning is often a form of reckoning).[25] Now, in the *Phaedo* passage we have just examined, Socrates stigmatises the attitude of the judicious hedonist à la Antisthenes, who οὐ λογίζεται ('reckon', 83c2) that the greatest ill afflicting him is not what he thinks it is. In other words, Antisthenes uses reason – like Callicles, we might say – but uses it badly, in a sophisticated and sophistic way, which is to say that he does not reckon things properly: he does not reckon (i.e. does not take account of the fact) that there exists a different reality from the sensible one, when it is in fact only by referring to this reality that man can truly attain happiness.

24 D. Ebrey (2017, esp. 4–7, 10–12) has rightly emphasised that this is the true damage caused by corporeal pleasures.

25 See Trabattoni 2016, p. 113.

The most evident and truest reality to which Socrates alludes here is obviously represented by the Forms, which throughout the *Phaedo* (as well as in other dialogues) ensure the possibility for the human soul to somehow attain higher goods than sensible ones (albeit only after death in a full and complete way).[26] Antisthenes' shortcoming, therefore, lies precisely in his failure to grasp the metaphysical rift – pointing to realities other than physical ones – that, at least according to Plato, was implicit to Socrates' ethics and 'wisdom'. Because of this failure, Antisthenes' 'Socrates' ultimately does not allow him to take even a single step beyond ordinary, non-philosophical ways of thinking: namely beyond the low and vulgar kind of virtue that coincides with a trade of physical pleasure, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Antisthenes' attitude of detachment towards bodily pleasures is, indeed, the attitude of someone seeking to experience them without incurring in any kind of damage: it is not the attitude of someone who is detached because he has found something better. This explains why Plato deemed it so important to fight Antisthenes' interpretation of Socrates: for if Antisthenes were right, then Socrates' teaching would lose all theoretical and practical significance. Indeed, according to Plato there can be no middle ground in this respect: either Socrates' philosophy implies the kind of metaphysical extensions which he – Plato – is seeking to highlight, or it ultimately amounts to nothing more than a sophistic reformulation of traditional conceptions. If Socrates were merely the thinker responsible for having radicalised the search for pleasure in the light of a kind of reason fully focused on the pursuit of this objective, his criticism of traditional ethics would amount to nothing more than the exposing of the false values behind which human beings usually conceal – out of shame – the omnipotence of desires. Paradoxical as it may seem, Antisthenes' Socrates is not all that different from Callicles and his tyrant: he is only more coherent and smarter, because he is truly capable of achieving the objective (bodily pleasures) which these others strove to attain in vain, because of their ignorance. Why should there be anything strange in the charge of corrupting the youth being levelled against a Socrates of this sort, which is to say someone who demolishes hypocritical traditional ideals and yet is incapable of replacing them with better ones?[27] If the interpretation suggested so far is acceptable, then another passage from the *Phaedo* (84a–b) might also contain a hidden polemic against Antisthenes:

> But that is how a philosophical man's soul would reason (λογίσαιτο). It would not suppose that, its own release being a job for philosophy, while

26 Cf. Ch. 1.

27 Hence the considerable efforts made by Xenophon (whose Socrates was at least as distant from Plato's, from a metaphysical standpoint, as Antisthenes' Socrates) to show that Socratic thought was actually wholly compatible with tradition.

> philosophy is doing that the soul should of its own accord surrender itself for the pleasures and pains to bind it back inside again, and should undertake a Penelope's interminable task by working at a sort of web in reverse. Instead such a man's soul secures a rest from these things, following its reasoning and being always engaged in reasoning, viewing what is true, divine and not an object of opinion, and sustained by that, and supposes both that it should live in this way as long as it lives, and that when it meets its end it will enter what is akin and of the same kind, and will be separated from human evils. So, given that sort of sustenance, there is no risk of its fearing, Simmias and Cebes, that it may be torn apart during its separation from the body and blown apart by the winds, and then fly away in all directions and no longer be anything anywhere.

Just as at 83c1, where we find an unspecified τις ("someone"), here the author speaks of the soul of a philosophical man who must not "reason", "reckon": (λογίσαιτο) in a certain way, i.e. who must not think it right to once more immerse himself in pleasures after having argued that philosophy should free the soul[28] (this would be like Penelope's web). Who is this man who, on the one hand, praises philosophy because it frees the soul, but on the other continues to surrender himself to pleasures and pains like a slave? Might this not be another allusion to Antisthenes, who used to speak of the soul, yet without identifying anything truly philosophical and liberating, thereby confining his ethics to the realm of pleasures?

5 Philosophy and the Use of λόγοι

The passage just quoted makes it possible to further support my argument – assuming, of course, that my suggested interpretation is acceptable. As is already evident from the allusions to *psyche* scattered throughout the Xenophon passage, according to Plato Antisthenes was not merely someone peddling a judicious form of hedonism as a counterfeit version of Socrates' thought, but also

28 There is an evident connection with the "art of measurement" of pleasures and pains expounded in a well-known section of the *Protagoras* (253c–257e). As already shown in ch. 3, this connection does not imply that according to Plato such an art should be rejected. In the *Protagoras* Plato's aim is to show that even who places his happiness in pleasure cannot avoid making use of reason (λογίζομαι, with obvious reference to λόγος). What is wrong with the hedonist is not his appeal, in ethical matters, to a comparative calculation between what is more or less good, but his incorrect identification of happiness and good with pleasure.

someone passing this judicious form of hedonism off as philosophical wisdom capable of drawing on the store-house of the soul. The problem, in other words, was that Antisthenes believed that he had established himself on the terrain of philosophy and developed the kind of 'intellectualistic' (or indeed 'spiritualistic') orientation that constituted the salient feature of Socrates' teaching; but according to Plato, this philosophy and intellectualism were essentially empty. Therefore, in Plato's eyes Antisthenes – no less than Isocrates, we might say – represented a dangerous rival, precisely because he did not oppose philosophy, but completely misunderstood its meaning. In other words, it was a matter of saving Socratism from the deviation represented by Cynicism,[29] which publicly presented itself as having 'noble' Socratic credentials (as the whole history of the Diogenean tradition shows) – credentials far more solid, for instance, than those which Aristippean Socratism could boast.

This attitude of Antisthenes' has been carefully highlighted by Aldo Brancacci, who has stressed what he regards as the "poussée intellectualiste" of his thought.[30] First of all, according to Brancacci, Maier was quite right to credit Antisthenes (via Xenophon's *Symposium*) with a 'philosophical' distinction between common love (directed towards the body) and celestial love (directed towards the soul), a distinction analogous to the one we find in Pausanias' speech in Plato's *Symposium*.[31] Moreover, Brancacci has stressed the Antisthenic inspiration of a passage from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*:[32]

> How can he who fails to consider the things that matter most, and strives by every means to do the things that are most pleasant, be better than the stupidest of creatures? No, only the self-controlled have power to consider the things that matter most, and, sorting them out after their kind, by word and deed alike to prefer the good and reject the evil. (tr. Marchant)

29 By this I do not mean to argue that Antisthenes was a Cynic *avant la lettre*; rather, I wish to show that, in opposing Antisthenes, Plato chiefly aimed to oppose a turn taken by Socratism (probably on the basis of quite a few elements found in the historical Socrates), which ultimately led to a Cynical outcome.

30 Brancacci 1993, p. 43.

31 Ibid., p. 51 and n. 40. In any case it also bears saying that the theory of *eros* which Pausanias expounds in the Platonic *Symposium* cannot be regarded as a faithful rendering of Plato's thought; rather, it represents a caricature of it, which distorts its essential meaning. I would suggest that the pederastic *eros* whose correct forms of expression Pausanias seeks to highlight seems to reflect more Xenophon's sensibility than Plato's. See Hindley 1994, pp. 347–366.

32 Xenoph. *mem.* IV 5.11. See Brancacci 1993, p. 42 ff. and Brancacci 1990, pp. 138–144.

Brancacci also refers to a passage from Themistius' *On Virtue* (surviving only in its Syriac version) which states that the criterion consists *in scientia et in prudentia recta et in veritate*; this would suggest that Antisthenes valued φρόνησις (wisdom) highly.[33] Finally, Brancacci has noted the presence in Antisthenes of a "theory of σοφός (the skilled, wise human beings) ... founded on the opposition between σπουδαῖοι and φαῦλοι (good and bad human beings), an opposition parallel to the one between ἐπιστήμη (science) and δόξα (opinion), σοφία (wisdom) and ἁμαρτία (failure)."[34] Actually, regardless of whether the abovementioned testimonies from Xenophon and Themistius may be attributed to Antisthenes[35] (something I have no reason to doubt), it seems as though here too, at least on the ethical level, Antisthenes' wisdom (*sophia*) is connected to the governing of sensory desires; hence, it is not very helpful in order to identify goods proper to the soul. Consider, for example, the following passage from Diogenes Laertius:

> (the wise man) will also marry in order to have children from union with the handsomest women; furthermore… he will not disdain to love, for only the wise man knows who are worthy to be loved. (tr. Hicks)[36]

The *sophia* mentioned here has the function not of directing one's desire towards a non-bodily objective, as in Plato, but rather of selecting the right person with whom to have erotic intercourse. In this case too, then, Antisthenes' *sophia* largely coincides with the judiciousness that goes with his hedonism, and which we have already seen at work in Xenophon's *Symposium*.

However, this does not change the fact that Antisthenes' conception of *philosophia* was sufficiently staunch and theoretically binding, at least in its professed principles, to worry Plato, since it was apparently very similar to the project of a 'Socratic' refounding of knowledge which he himself had launched. If the data collected by Aldo Brancacci, along with his general reconstruction of Antisthenes' thought, are correct, Antisthenes sought to promote an *episteme* based on the distinction between 'opinion' (δόξα) and 'truth' (ἀλήθεια).[37]

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33 34.10–35.9 (Lat. transl. from the Mach edition): Brancacci 1993, pp. 40–41, n. 12. English translation by A Rigolio: "In knowledge, in righteous discernment, in truth", in J. Wilberding – J.Trompeter – A. Rigolio 2019.

34 Brancacci 1993, p. 49.

35 Neither testimony is included in the collections by Decleva Caizzi, Giannantoni and Prince.

36 Diog. Laert. VI 11 = 115 Decleva Caizzi = V A 58 Giannantoni = 58 Prince.

37 Brancacci 1997, p. 160. For a broader description of the portrayal of Antisthenes as a "rigorous philosopher" proposed by Brancacci, see Brancacci 1990.

For Antisthenes, moreover, the quest for truth was closely connected to man's search "for a way to become καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός" (a very good man), and this "search was identified with φιλοσοφεῖν" (loving wisdom, doing philosophy)[38] Finally, Antisthenes promoted a "doctrinal approach according to which logical-dialectical thought serves as a foundation and guarantee for ethics, radically ruling out the possibility of any theory of παιδεία (education) that is not located on the level of ἐπιστήμη (science/knowledge) and does not coincide with φιλοσοφεῖν."[39] Brancacci can therefore conclude that the Aristotelian idea of a "sophisticated … eminent … and at the same time unique knowledge … furnished with the traits of dominance and what later came to be known as universality … had already been fully developed by Antisthenes in the early 4th century."[40] It is also noteworthy that Antisthenes grounded this theoretical ideal in a harsh polemic with Isocrates' far blander and more empirical conception of philosophy – a polemic in some ways not unlike Plato's.[41] It is perfectly understandable, therefore, that Plato might feel especially threatened by a philosophy such as Antisthenes', which had sprung from the same Socratic branch as his own and which, on the one hand, pursued the same polemical objectives and, on the other, was designed to fulfil the same theoretical and practical requirements.

This broad similarity would appear to extend even to Platonic dualism, according to a testimony from the aforementioned *On Virtue* by Themistius. Here Prometheus reproaches Hercules for having devoted himself to human things, abandoning higher ones. For – Prometheus goes on to explain – Hercules will never become a perfect man until he has learned those things that are more sublime than human beings. Themistius then adds that, according to Antisthenes, the man who puts all his study and attention into human things *non sapiens est, sed animali similis, cui sterquilinium gratus est. Sublimes vero sunt omnes res caelestes, et nos oportet sententiam de eis habere sublimem.*[42] According to Plato, Antisthenes had failed to find the path leading to *sublimes … res caelestes* (celestial and high things). In Plato's eyes, these *res caelestes* identified by the *sapiens* are bound to be the Forms; but, as is also evident from what is arguably the most famous aspect of the tradition concerning him, Antisthenes did not grant the existence of entities of this kind. For Plato it was crucial to

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38 Brancacci 1997, p. 161.

39 Ibid., p. 163 ff.

40 Ibid., p. 177.

41 Ibid., p. 160. See also Brancacci 1990, pp. 97–104.

42 32 Mach = 27 Decleva Caizzi = V A 96 Giannantoni = 96 Prince. Rigolio's translation: "(He) is not wise – as Antisthenes said – but resembles an animal that finds a dunghill agreeable. For all the celestial things are high, and we ought to have a high opinion of them".

stress this lack of a metaphysical perspective, because only by so doing could he highlight the chasm between his own Socratism and Antisthenes', despite the apparently remarkable degree of proximity between the two (particularly when Antisthenes' philosophy is compared with traditional teachings and rhetorical and sophistic education). According to Plato, for all his statements of principle, Antisthenes did not actually have a theory enabling him to substantiate the distinction between opinion and truth; hence, he ultimately turned out to be very similar to the *philodox*. The latter figure coincides precisely with the good fellow (χρηστός) who acknowledges the existence of beautiful, unitary, and just things yet not the existence of beauty, oneness, and justice in themselves (*resp*. 478e7–479a8). At the risk of stretching things too far, I would venture to suggest that the term χρηστός here was not chosen at random, but may conceal another polemical reference to Antisthenes. In a testimony from Porphyry, Antisthenes repeatedly emphasises the *chresis tou logou* (χρῆσις τοῦ λόγου; tr. Prince: "the use of account") which lay at the heart of Odysseus' virtue and *sophia*.[43] Furthermore, in a passage from Epictetus we read that the philosopher's freedom lies in the *chresis phantasiòn* (χρῆσις φαντασιῶν; tr. Prince: "The use of [your] mental impressions"), which is to say the free use of impressions.[44] Plato may be alluding to the fact that Antisthenes' employment of logos was of no use (*chresis*) to him (who is ironically called *chrestòs*), because it did not lead him to the discovery of the only object capable of ensuring the philosopher's freedom (and hence the good life). For Antisthenes, this good life and freedom instead merely amounted to the freedom to make use of sensible impressions, and thus proved incapable of leading man towards any dimension other than the corporeal one.

Note too that, in the passage from Porphyry, Antisthenes introduces "the use of account" (*logos*) in order to show in what sense Odysseus' πολυτροπία (versatility) coincides with his *sophia*: Homer states that Odysseus is *sophòs* precisely because he is *polytropos*, insofar as " he … knew how to converse with people in many ways" (here, and later, tr. Prince). In this respect he was similar to Pythagoras, who was capable of adapting his speech to suit his audience. Conversely, "uniformity … being unharmonious to diverse audience members, makes the account multiplex [*polytropic*]". Instead, "multiplicity [*polytropia*] of account and variegated use of account towards variegated hearings becomes simplicity [*monotropia*]". Indeed, "what is proper to each is one" (ἕν … τὸ ἑκάστῳ οἰκεῖον). In such a way, "what is harmonious for each gathers the variegation of account

43 The passage is drawn from the fragments of the *Homeric Questions*: 51 Decleva Caizzi = V A 191 Giannantoni = 187 Prince.

44 Epictet *Diss*. III 24.67 = 118 Decleva Caizzi = V B 22 Giannantoni 5; Prince 34 E.

into one thing, the appropriate account for each". The Socratic inspiration of this method emerges quite clearly from Xenophon. In his view, out of all the people he knew, Socrates was the one most capable of producing agreement in his listeners. The reason for this ability, according to Xenophon, is to be found in what Socrates used to say about Homer: the latter had attributed to Odysseus the quality of a reliable orator "because he had a way of leading the discussion from one acknowledged truth to another."[45] However, there is one crucial difference between the *polytropia* of Socrates' Odysseus (as described by Xenophon) and that of Antisthenes' Odysseus: whereas the former's *polytropia* does not amount to much more than the 'rhetorical' skill of proposing topics suited to different audiences (a trait which in any case also distinguishes Plato's Socrates),[46] the rhetoric of Antisthenes' Odysseus presupposes a unitary underlying objective ("what is proper to each is one"), which can – and must – be pursued precisely through the diversity of *logoi*. This unity in turn coincides with something good or advantageous/proper (οἰκεῖον) that is identical for each and every person.

What proves interesting here, once again, is a comparison with the *Gorgias* passage quoted above (506d–e). In his procedure Antisthenes goes one step beyond the mere rhetorical device attributed to Socrates in the Xenophon passage just quoted. However, in Plato's eyes, this step is incapable of ensuring a unitary foundation that is sufficiently well-defined to promote what is advantageous for each individual and the good life: for while it is true that Antisthenes' reasoning sets out from the one/many relationship, just like Plato's reasoning, it is equally true that Antisthenes' reasoning remains too undefined to reduce "to one thing" the "variegated use of account". Things are very different in the *Gorgias* passage. Here Socrates, as we have seen, states that in order to realise the proper good of each thing and in each thing, it is necessary to adopt as a criterion a unitary principle of a general sort, which can be described as "good disposition, order, rightness", etc. If the intellect is incapable of identifying – or at least knowing in an approximate way[47] – a general kind of good, there is no matter in relation to which the *logos* can exercise its distributive function.

According to Antisthenes' own conception, the diversity of *logoi* concerns their *tropos* (way, or manner), which, in turn, depends on individual differences, whereas their object is evidently the same. As we read in Porphyry's testimony, "to search out the version appropriate to each [is] characteristic of

45 *Mem.* IV 6.15, tr. Marchant.
46 Cf. e.g. *Men.* 75d4–6 and *Phaedr*. 277b8–c3.
47 See *Resp.* 506b ff. and *Phil.* 65A, where Socrates, respectively, limits his discussion of the good to the metaphorical level and denies that the good can be grasped through a single idea.

wisdom (*sophia*)". Therefore, while there are many modes to search out the version appropriate to each is characteristic of wisdom (*sophia*), there is only one *sophia*.

The same conclusion can be reached by examining the example of medicine we find in the same fragment. As the constitution (σύστασις) of sick people is varied (ποικίλη), their treatment too must be *polytropos* (fr. 187 Prince, 12). Clearly, though, this *poikilia* and *polytropia* do not undermine the unicity of the aim, which for all sick people is good health. The problem, for Plato, is that Antisthenes is incapable of pointing, on the theoretical level, to a general content of *sophia* sufficient to ground its unity; and, on the practical level, to a "proper good" that is well-defined enough to allow its particularisation through the *polytropia* of *logoi*. In other words, either *sophia,* the 'proper' (οἰκεῖον), and the 'suitable' (πρόσφερον) truly differ from one instance to the next, in which case the difference between *logoi* is more than just a difference of *tropos,* or the difference between them only concerns their *tropos*, in which case *sophia*, *oikeion*, and *prospheron* must display an identical universal content. To put it in the language of the *Cratylus*,[48] what this means is that the "examination of names" (ἡ τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐπίσκεψις)[49] leads to *one sophia* only if each name is a *tropos*, and hence if, beyond names, there exist unitary and general multi-linguistic entities. But, according to Plato, this can only occur on the basis of that metaphysical dimension that Antisthenes refused to acknowledge. Indeed, according to Plato there is no other way to grasp a good having a general character: a good that takes the form of the kind of unity which orders and transcends the multiplicity of sensible things, and which Plato primarily identifies with the Forms (which are precisely the unity of the sensible multiplicity corresponding to them), but also with the Form of Good, with the limit of the *Philebus*, and with the One of the philosopher's unwritten doctrines.

As already noted at the beginning, my argument is not meant as a demonstration of the fact that Plato's aim in the passages from the *Republic* and *Gorgias* quoted above is to engage in a polemic with Antisthenes. Conversely, I do not believe that it is necessary to prove that those passages (particularly the one from the *Republic*) reveal a theoretical approach in sharp contrast with Antisthenes' declared metaphysical "short-sightedness". After all, this is all too evident and well-known. My aim here has rather been to highlight the devastating ethical consequences entailed by this theoretical deficiency, which in Plato's view ultimately made a second-rate forgery of Socrates' noble philosophical inspiration. If it is true, as Brancacci writes, that according to Antisthenes philosophy must

48 See Trabattoni 2016, Ch. 7.

49 Antisthenes, fr. 160 Price.

serve as *paideia*, meaning that it must identify a way for man to become *kalòs kai agathòs*, and therefore must establish itself as a kind of logical-dialectical thought which serves as a foundation and guarantee for ethics, it can easily be argued that Antisthenes and Plato had precisely the same idea. However, Plato wishes to show that "Antithenes' logical-dialectical thought" is far too content-deficient to fulfil the guiding role in the ethical field that the Socratic philosopher sought to assign it. And the biographical tradition on Antisthenes suggests that Plato was not wholly mistaken in this respect.

6 The Philosopher's Life and Death

Let us start from a testimony by Dio Chrysostom:[50]

> He quickly learned to disparage most of them, but he kept company with Antisthenes, because he praised not so much the man, but the words that he spoke, and Diogenes considered them alone to be true and most able to benefit the human being. For in comparing Antisthenes himself against his words, he would sometimes prove that he was far softer, and he said by way of rebuke that he was a war trumpet: for he did not hear himself, since he spoke the loudest.[51] (tr. Prince)

This account informs us that, according to Diogenes, Antisthenes did not practise what he preached. So, Diogenes gladly listened to his speeches, since he found them profitable, but criticised the person delivering them for his inability to put his own suggestions into practice (and hence to benefit from them himself). What is particularly interesting is the image of a trumpet that makes a great noise and is heard by everyone except the person playing it. Now, it is difficult to conceive of anything more anti-Socratic than this discrepancy between *logoi* and actions, thought and life. Consider the *Crito*, where Socrates' interlocutor of the same name seeks to persuade his friend that philosophy is fine as long as it is only a matter of discussing problems; but that when life forces us to make dramatic

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50 Dio Chrysost. *orat.* VIII 1–2 = 139 Decleva Caizzi = V B 584 Giannantoni = 34A Prince. Decleva Caizzi 1966, p. 123, writes: "Dione di Prusa è una buona fonte per gli autori antichi, e Antistene in specie; non è da escludere che gli aneddoti da lui citati rappresentino in modo veritiero i rapporti tra i due filosofi".

51 τῶν μὲν οὖν ἄλλων ταχὺ κατεφρόνησεν, Ἀντισθένει δὲ ἐχρῆτο, οὐκ αὐτὸν οὕτως ἐπαινῶν ὡς τοὺς λόγους οὓς ἔλεγεν, ἡγούμενος μόνους εἶναι ἀληθεῖς καὶ μάλιστα δυναμένους ἄνθρωπον ὠφελῆσαι. ἐπεὶ αὐτόν γε τὸν Ἀντισθένην παραβάλλων πρὸς τοὺς λόγους ἐνίοτε ἤλεγχεν ὡς πολὺ μαλακώτερον, καὶ ἔφη αὐτὸν εἶναι σάλπιγγα λοιδορῶν. αὐτοῦ γὰρ οὐκ ἀκούειν φθεγγομένου μέγιστον.

choices, we need to act differently, leaving philosophy aside. Better still, consider the Socrates of the *Phaedo*, who fully conforms his actions to his reason, and acts precisely in accordance with the degree of wisdom and truth this reason has been able to attain. Socrates' reasoning has proven that *in all likelihood* death is not an evil, because the soul is immortal, and a better fate than earthly life awaits the souls of virtuous people in the afterlife. Therefore, Socrates accepts the prospect of dying with a degree of confidence and serenity that precisely mirrors the value of his *logoi*. Nor can it be argued that the friends gathered around him on the day of his death have any reason – like Dio's Diogenes – to praise his speeches and to expect to benefit from them alone. On the contrary, the *magna pars* of Socrates' teaching lies precisely in the perfect coherence between thoughts and actions, and in the example he sets, showing how the wisdom afforded by philosophy, far from amounting to empty prattle, can truly be put into practice (even in a dramatic context such as that of death). In the light of all this, Antisthenes cannot even hope to save the truth of his *logoi* 'hypocritically', by separating them from his human weaknesses (as Diogenes thought he could do): for every coherent Socratic philosopher knows that ethical evil coincides with ignorance, and therefore that morally wrong behaviours are irrefutable proof of the fact that those who put them into practice have a bad theory.

But the most evident proof of the huge chasm between Socrates' 'practice' and Antisthenes' – which shows that Antisthenes' Socratic philosophy was fallacious and false – is to be found in their different attitudes to death. Let us read what Diogenes Laertius writes about this:[52]

> He died of disease just as Diogenes, who had come in, inquired of him, "Have you need of a friend?" Once too Diogenes, when he came to him, brought a dagger. And when Antisthenes cried out, "Who will release me from these pains?" replied, "This," showing him the dagger. "I said," quoth the other, "from my pains, not from life."[53]

One can hardly imagine a sharper contrast between Socrates' death, which is serenely endured thanks to the belief that the *melete thanatou* (care for death) of the *philo-sophos* is a wholly reasonable desire (for only in this way can he

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52 Diog. Laert. VI 18–19 = 142 Decleva Caizzi = V A 37 Giannantoni = 37A Prince. Giannantoni 1990, IV, p. 201, is inclined to read this testimony in the light of the "vasta aneddotica sulle amicizie e inimicizie tra i filosofi, che proprio in Diogene Laerzio è largamente documentata".

53 ἐτελεύτησε δὲ ἀρρωστίᾳ: ὅτε καὶ Διογένης εἰσιὼν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔφη, "μήτι χρεία φίλου;" καί ποτε παρ᾽ αὐτὸν ξιφίδιον ἔχων εἰσῄει. τοῦ δ᾽ εἰπόντος, "τίς ἂν ἀπολύσειέ με τῶν πόνων;" δείξας τὸ ξιφίδιον, ἔφη, "τοῦτο": καὶ ὅς, "τῶν πόνων," εἶπον, "οὐ τοῦ ζῆν.

fully attain the happiness he aspires to), and the painful death of Antisthenes, who would like to be released from pains, yet not from life. Antisthenes' attitude is actually perfectly coherent with the lack of a metaphysical perspective highlighted above. Like the hypothetical character which Socrates alludes to in *Phaedo* 83c, the two poles shaping his whole experience are pain and sensory pleasure: hence, death can in no way assuage the physical pain caused by sickness. Death does away with pain, but also with pleasure, which is to say the only good (provided it is carefully measured) that can engender happiness according to Antisthenes. Therefore, he is quite right to rue the prospect of death. However, from a Platonic perspective this means (or, rather, would mean) that Antisthenes has learned nothing from Socrates. The painful dread he experiences on this occasion is the clearest practical demonstration of the fact that the true Socrates is Plato's Socrates, not Antisthenes'. Indeed, in a crucial passage of the *Phaedo* (68b–c), Socrates states that sufficient proof to establish that an individual is not a philosopher is provided by the fact that he regrets having to die. In doing so, this person shows that he is not a *philosophos* (i.e. lover of wisdom) but a *philosomatos* (i.e. lover of body), just as, with Antisthenes' death, the *philosophia* that is practically demonstrated by Socrates' death turns into *philozoia* (love of life). From Plato's perspective, Antisthenes' *philosomatia* and *philozoia* can only be the direct consequence of his lack of metaphysical sensibility. Antisthenes debased the philosophical wisdom promoted by Socrates by turning it into a judicious assessment of material pleasures, reducing the "use (*chresis*) of *logoi*" to nothing – as is shown by Antisthenes' failure to practically apply his *logoi* during his lifetime, and by their complete uselessness at the time of his death.

Finally, it may be worth noting that in both of the above-mentioned episodes from Antisthenes' life, the man who somehow highlights their deficiencies is the Cynic Diogenes. Scholars have long discussed the relationship between the two philosophers, and especially the hypothesis according to which Antisthenes was the founder of a Cynical school that found its first pupil in Diogenes. With regard to this issue, I essentially share the sceptical view adopted by Giannantoni, who on the one hand has highlighted the flimsiness of the historical evidence adduced in support of Antisthenes' scholarcate and, on the other, has drawn a clear theoretical distinction between Antisthenes' 'Socratism' and Diogenes' 'Cynicism'.[54] Still, as Giannantoni himself acknowledges, this does not rule out that the encounter between Antisthenes and Diogenes occurred when they had already developed two well-defined philosophical personalities.[55] In this case, the anecdotes about the relationship between the

54 See Giannantoni 1990, p. 222 ff. and Id., 1993, pp. 15–34.

55 Giannantoni 1993 a, p. 22.

two philosophers, once freed from the biased notion of discipleship, may well be reliable. Be that as it may, such issues are relatively unimportant for us. The limited verifiability of the actual historical relationship between the two figures and ancient authors' penchant for unreliable chains of succession do not change the fact that the doxographical tradition interpreted Cynicism as an outgrowth of Socrates' teaching, which eventually branched off into Stoicism. All I wish to establish here is that – Stoicism aside – Plato himself had enough elements to be able to foresee this possible outcome and hence the need to take drastic countermeasures.

The figure of Diogenes is highly revealing in this respect. If it were possible – as he clearly believed – to save the truth and usefulness of Antisthenes' *logos* by attributing their author's inconsistent practical behaviour to some particular personal flaw, the path leading from Socrates to Cynicism would remain dangerously open. In this case, in order to save Socrates' philosophy, there would be no need to enrich it with Plato's metaphysics: it would be enough to rigorously fulfil the ideal of the complete liberation of the soul from material and external goods (including life itself), which is more or less what Diogenes sought to achieve. For Plato it is thus crucial to show that the theoretical premises from which Antisthenes set out were erroneous in principle, and hence that no good could come from them, since Socratic 'care of the soul' pointed in a completely different direction. The considerable historical importance of this controversy between Plato and the 'proto-Cynic' Antisthenes also clearly emerges from the fact that Platonism and Stoicism were to engage in a bitter battle, on this very level, over the following centuries. According to the Platonists, the emphasis on rationality in Stoic ethics stands in serious contrast to their materialism, leading both to an incapacity to identify goods proper to reason (i.e. to the soul) and to unsolvable contradictions within their system.[56]

56 See e.g. Plut. *de comm. not. adv. stoic.* 26 (1070f–1071e): the Stoics deny that the πρῶτα κατὰ φύσιν amount to goods in themselves, and identify the τέλος with τὸ ἐκλέγεσθαι καὶ λαμβάνειν ἐκεῖνα φρονίμως (1071b). In this way, they avoid identifying the τέλος with material goods, and claim to have found it in the exercise of reason (cf. φρονίμως, but also the εὐλόγιστος ἐκλογή which Plutarch mentions at 1071a). However, according to the Platonists, this reason is incapable of identifying a 'rational' good (i.e. a good of the soul) that is independent and different from the πρῶτα κατὰ φύσιν. The first chapters of Plotinus' *On Happiness* (I 4.1–4) are particularly clear as regards this point. See Linguiti 2000, esp. p. 103 ff. and n. 10.

CHAPTER 5

Recollection

1 Recollection as Proof of Immortality

Once the first argument in favour of the immortality of the soul (the so-called *antapodosis* argument) has been exhausted, Cebes chimes in to reinforce the points made by Socrates. He does so by invoking a doctrine frequently expounded by the latter, the so-called doctrine of recollection (*anamnesis*). This states that learning is a kind of remembrance; hence, according to Cebes, it implies both that the soul has learned something before birth and that it must somehow have existed prior to its embodiment (72e–73a). Then in reply to Simmias' question as to what the evidence in support of this thesis might be (Cebes had stated: "if it is true"), Cebes provides one of the very few self-citations to be found in the dialogues: he recalls the *Meno*'s example of a slave-boy who solves a geometry problem without having ever studied geometry, simply by answering Socrates' questions (73a–b). However, Socrates, who is always careful to persuade his interlocutors in the best possible way, this time offers not a practical demonstration (as in the case of the slave) but a theoretical one.

This marks the beginning of one of the most thorny and widely discussed sections in the whole of Plato's oeuvre. Many of the problems that have been detected in the text depend, in my opinion, on the misleading assumption that the theory of recollection is a sort of epistemological doctrine, that is a method or path by which it is possible to attain the knowledge of the Forms.[1] This approach has inspired the now widely debated hypothesis that recollection is a faculty which Plato assigns not to all human beings, but only to philosophers[2]

1 See esp. Franklin 2005, p. 289, who opens his essay with the peremptory (and unjustified) claim that "recollection is a theory of learning". A sharp criticism of this assumption may be found in Dimas 2003. Dimas' interpretation of the *Phaedo*'s doctrine of recollection is the one that comes closest to the interpretation I am offering here.

2 Scott 1995 (Scott had already presented his thesis, which concerns in particular the interpretation of recollection in the *Meno*, in various previous studies; a quick discussion of the two alternatives is already found in Gallop 1975, pp. 119–121). A recent overview of the state of the question is provided by Franklin 2005, pp. 289–291. Franklin calls "ordinary interpretation" the view (upheld by Hackforth 1972, Gosling 1965, Ackrill 1974, and Bostock 1986, among others) that recollection concerns all human beings and "sophisticated interpretation" the one endorsed by Scott. Following the publication of Scott's studies, the ordinary interpretation has been upheld – with various nuances – by Kelsey 2000, Osey 2001, and Dimas 2003; an intermediate position has been favoured by Bedu-Addo 1991, and Williams 2002. On his part,

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(the only human beings capable of attaining any knowledge of ideal reality). One possible corollary of this thesis is that Plato eventually abandoned recollection as a method of cognition in favour of dialectic, as he switched from the role of a metaphysical and speculative philosopher to the more sober one of a researcher seeking to solve epistemological and ontological problems while remaining within a worldly dimension.

One first reason why this interpretation cannot be correct may be found by comparing this passage with the ones occurring a little earlier on in the text (66e–67a), where Socrates peremptorily states that, assuming that any knowledge of the ideal world is indeed possible, this can only be attained after death (see chapter 1). Now, given that the theory of recollection revolves precisely around the fact that the soul must possess knowledge in its disembodied form (i.e. prior to its union with a body), it is very unlikely that the aim of this theory is to bridge the divide between the imperfect knowledge which distinguishes the soul-body composite and the perfect knowledge that characterises the disembodied soul.

This impression is further confirmed when we examine how and to what end the notion of recollection is introduced in the *Phaedo*. We should not forget that the reason why it is introduced is to show that the soul is immortal (or, at any rate, that it must necessarily exist prior to its embodiment). In order to do so, it is crucial to show that the soul necessarily had knowledge of certain objects before birth. Certainly, this in itself does not rule out the possibility that the soul may know such objects even after its embodiment. One might envisage a scenario of the following sort: in his mortal condition, man can know both particulars (e.g. sensible equals things) and universals (e.g. sameness itself). Since, however, the knowledge of the latter cannot be derived from the knowledge of the former (as nothing possessing a universal character offers itself to the senses), we must conclude that the soul knew the Forms

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Franklin 2005 essentially accepts the ordinary interpretation, while making many concessions to the rival interpretation (in his view, there is an aspect of recollection that is only accessible to philosophers; the same view is held by Williams 2002). It should be noted, however, that the position of Scott's opponents is considerably weakened by the fact that they share his assumption, namely the idea that recollection is a method of cognition: a method, these scholars argue, that explains the formation of abstract or universal concepts (see e.g., Williams 2002, p. 131). If this were the case, given that the method in question ultimately leads to the Forms, then we would have to either deny that recollection concerns all human beings or distinguish between a *generalis* recollection and a *specialis* one. But once we realise that recollection is neither a research method nor a way of explaining how concepts are formed (as I will now endeavour to show), all these problems no longer apply.

prior to its embodiment and that, once embodied, it retrieved the knowledge of universals through the 'method' of recollection.

However, it is easy to see that this argument does not work. For if it were true that human beings (or some of them) can have full knowledge of the Forms even in their mortal condition, the problem raised by the *Phaedo* could more easily be explained in an alternative way, by simply invoking the fact that man has two different faculties of knowledge (the senses and the intellect), pertaining to two different sorts of objects, sensibles (particulars) and intelligibles (universals). And if this were the case, then in order to attain knowledge of the universals man would only have to exercise pure thought instead of the senses, without having to assume that the intelligibles exist in a separate dimensions.[3] But clearly this is not the case. The problem disappears, however, once we realise that recollection is not a method to attain knowledge of the Forms. But where, then, does its significance lie?

2 Recollection as the Condition of Possibility of Knowledge

Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that both the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* invoke recollection for the same reason, namely to find a sufficient justification (in the vaguely Kantian sense of 'condition of possibility') for real phenomena such as learning and the state of 'knowledge' that derives from it.[4] In the *Meno* it is a matter of circumventing the 'eristic paradox', according to which we can learn neither what we already know (for this would be pointless) nor what we do not know (for this would be impossible).[5] However, as learning is a real fact, it is necessary to posit a middle ground between knowledge and ignorance. And this is precisely the state illustrated by recollection, which explains learning not as a transition from ignorance to knowledge but as a transition from virtual (i.e. forgotten) knowledge to actual knowledge.

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3 Dimas 2003, p. 193, aptly notes: "If Plato is convinced independently [i.e. from the theory of recollection] that the forms exist and can be known by human souls anyway, exactly what is the philosophical gain of insisting that perception makes us recollect a knowledge our souls had of them before they were born into a body?"

4 The difference between the two dialogues is instead stressed by Lafrance 2007. Clearly, some differences are to be found, although they are not as significant as scholars often maintain; at any rate, they are not so great as to suggest that Plato did not believe in this doctrine, as Weiss 2000 argues. Likewise, the attempts made to reduce the doctrine of recollection to its sheer epistemological aspect cannot be wholly correct, even though they contain some interesting suggestions (see e.g., Nakagawa 2000).

5 *Meno* 80d–e.

Although the *Meno* includes an allusion to the survival of the soul after death (81a–c), it makes no mention of the Forms. In the *Phaedo*, by contrast, they become the linchpin of the whole argument: the condition of possibility for learning and acquiring knowledge is precisely the existence of the Forms in a separate dimension, and hence of a soul that was able to know them in that dimension prior to its embodiment. This, then, is the real reason why Plato introduces the doctrine of recollection in the *Phaedo*: not to lay out the path by which philosophers can regain full knowledge of the Ideas, but to demonstrate the necessarily metaphysical nature of the soul. If this is the case, we can easily understand why it is impossible for Plato to have replaced recollection with dialectic: they are two completely different things. Whereas recollection is the metaphysical condition of possibility for a partial retrieval of that knowledge of the Forms that the soul possessed in a complete way before its embodiment, dialectic is precisely the method by which this partial retrieval can be achieved.

The key element governing the whole argument is the notion that recollection can only adequately be understood if we take into account the metaphysical dualism on which it rests, and which in turn is connected to the immortality of the soul.[6] It may be argued that many of the problems identified and discussed by scholars in relation to recollection are due to the underestimating of this background. Anyone who maintains, for instance, that the doctrine of recollection assumes the existence of the Forms as a given[7] is clearly conflating the Platonic Forms with generic universals, whereas separation from sensible reality is the distinguishing feature of the former, as Aristotle clearly realised.[8] Given this separation, the aim of recollection is not to retrieve the forgotten knowledge of the Forms, but to prove that the universals we recognise in

6 This requirement is rightly stressed by Kelsey 2000, pp. 91–93.

7 Thus Scott 1995 (but it is a very widespread thesis: see e.g. Burnet 1911, *passim*, Hackforth 1972, p. 73, Decleva Caizzi 1986, p. 33; Kelsey 2000, p. 99–101; Svavarsson 2009, p. 60; Ferber 2018, p. 230. The opposite view is upheld, among others, by Woolf 2000, pp. 123–125; Dimas 2003, pp. 184–185, 194 and n. 25; Forcignanò 2018. See too Trabattoni 2006, p. 706 and n. 16): given the existence of the Forms, recollection would be the method that makes it possible to retrieve an objective knowledge of them. Actually, in my view the correct interpretation of the doctrine of recollection states the exact opposite: the purpose of recollection is not to enable knowledge of the Ideas, once their existence has been established, but rather to ascertain the existence of the Ideas *in a separate dimension*, even though it is not possible to attain any objective knowledge of them (as is obvious, given that the doctrine is meant to show that the Ideas are *in a separate dimension*).

8 This solves one of the problems which inspired the sophisticated interpretation, namely the hypothesis that recollection only works for those who already know the Forms – which of course does not apply to those who are not philosophers (see Franklin 2005, p. 290).

sensible experience are the copies of perfect models existing in a separate dimension (i.e. the Platonic Forms).

The doctrine of recollection, as it is expounded in the *Phaedo*, thus outlines a scenario of the following sort: (1) all human beings at the time of their birth have a previous, but now forgotten, knowledge of universals; (2) given this fact, Socrates can resort to complex arguments – that are clearly only accessible to philosophers – in order to show that there exist in a separate dimension objects such as the Forms (i.e. the perfect models of the imperfect universals found in mundane reality), and hence that the soul already existed before becoming embodied; (3) if we now leave the exposition of the *Phaedo* (which leads to the immortality of the soul) and follow a hypothetical path towards the knowledge of the Forms, we can reach two conclusions: (3a) the Forms can never be known in a full and complete way (the original versions of earthly objects only exist in a separate dimension); (3b) an approximate knowledge of the Forms can be acquired by those who exercise dialectic as the questioning of the soul.

3 Problems Solved

In my view, the correctness of this interpretation is confirmed by its capacity to solve some of the problems which contemporary scholars have long been debating, without ever reaching an acceptable solution. As we have seen, much has been said both for and against Scott's thesis that recollection is only available to philosophers. Against this thesis an objection was raised first by Scott himself (who sought to answer it)[9] and then by many of his critics:[10] if recollection were only available to philosophers, then only the philosopher's soul would exist before the body. Clearly, this inference assumes that the reverse is also true: in order to prove that the soul of individual x exists before his or her body, it is necessary to show that the individual in question is capable of exercising recollection (at least in theory). And if we wish to show that the souls *of all human beings* exist before their bodies, we must show that in principle all human beings can exercise recollection.[11] But is it really plausible to conclude that according to Plato all human beings possess this capacity? Clearly, it is not. If, then, the pre-existence of the soul must apply to all, it can in no way be conditioned by the possibility of recalling or knowing the Forms in the present. Indeed, recollection operates in a different way: it proves that

9 Scott 1995, pp. 69–71.
10 See e.g. Franklin 2005, p. 290, and the earlier Bostock 1986, p. 67.
11 See Sedley 2007, p. 69.

the soul exists before the body insofar as it shows that all human beings are capable of undertaking certain operations of knowledge-acquisition, operations *other than the acquisition of knowledge of the Forms*,[12] which they would not be able to carry out, however, *if objects such as the Forms did not exist and if their souls had not known them prior to their embodiment*.[13] At least in this case, then, the difference between philosophers and non-philosophers is not a matter of the degree to which they have knowledge of the world; rather, it concerns, respectively, the capacity and lack of capacity to correctly interpret this knowledge: only philosophers are aware of the fact that "to learn is to recall"[14] (and of everything that follows from this); hence, they alone realise that the soul (of all human beings) saw the Forms before its embodiment and hence existed before the body.[15]

The interpretation I am suggesting, therefore, is intended to show, on the one hand, that the theory of recollection is not meant to establish the possibility of a complete retrieval of knowledge of the Ideas (as Scott maintains) and, on the other hand, that recollection cannot be regarded as a method of enquiry (one possibly alternative to dialectic). This latter point is confirmed, in my view, by the fact that in his argument Socrates never explains how the alleged 'method' of recollection ought to be applied (which would be odd indeed, if recollection really were a method of inquiry).[16] The argument is a lengthy and complicated

12 An excellent definition is provided by Dimas 2003 (p. 186), who simply speaks of "conceptual thought".

13 This was correctly noted by Kelsey 2000, pp. 94–95, 114–115. A convincing demonstration that the equal sticks and stones argument "proves both the existence of Forms and recollection, without assuming either of these two" can be found in Forcignanò 2018, p. 254.

14 76a6–7.

15 The observation that the doctrine of recollection is something too complex for ordinary people (and that it therefore only concerns philosophers, as Scott maintains) is thus refuted. While the doctrine is indeed complex, this does not pose an obstacle, since its purpose is not at all to show people how to attain knowledge. A good metaphor for Scott's reasoning might be this: as physicians alone can grasp the causes of digestion in all of their complexity, physicians alone digest food.

16 See Frede 2001, p. 255 (cf. Frede 1999): Plato never seems to clearly explain or apply the 'method' of recollection (with the sole exception of the very particular case of the *Meno*). In my view, however, Frede does not draw the correct inferences from this. Finding the situation unsatisfactory, she strives to identify in the *Phaedo* one possible way in which the alleged 'method' of recollection might work, and that is: by enabling us to draw inferences with regard to non-empirical (and hence non-obvious) connections, starting from empirical data (p. 258). This interpretation, however, distorts Plato's intentions. If Plato in the *Phaedo* never explains how recollection works, we have no right to be dissatisfied; rather, we have the duty to find out why he does not explain this. And the reason is precisely that recollection is not a method of research but only a way of demonstrating that

one; but the core of the proof, which is to say the demonstration of the fact that this inborn knowledge must have been acquired before birth, is contained in a rather short passage, which it is worth focusing on (74d–75a). Let us assume that I see two things that look the same to me. My cognitive faculties clearly allow me to perform the two following operations: (1) see that these things are *roughly* the same; (2) realise that they are not *unconditionally* the same. Then we may ask: what makes me realise that a certain thing is roughly the same but not unconditionally the same? In order to do so, it seems that I must have at least some knowledge of what is unconditionally equal, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to realise that something is *roughly*, and thus not *unconditionally*, equal. But as in this world there are no examples of things that are the same or beautiful in an unconditional sense, I must have acquired this knowledge in another dimension, anterior to my present life.[17] And since what is perfectly equal is clearly the Form of equality, the whole argument amounts to this: (1) there are some real acts of cognition, available to everyone, that entail previous knowledge of the Forms; (2) such knowledge of the Forms cannot have been acquired in this life; (3) hence, there must have been a life of the soul (the subject responsible for the acts in question) anterior to the present life; (4) therefore, the soul already existed prior to its embodiment.[18]

If recollection were really a method of enquiry aimed at the knowledge of Forms, a completely different scenario would be required: (1) human beings forgot the Forms in the very same way in which now, for instance, I cannot remember the look of a friend; (2) the aim of recollection is precisely to retrieve in my mind the look of the friend I forgot; (3) to do that, I put in place the same mnemotechnical devices I use when I am trying to retrieve the image of the friend I have lost: association, concentration on myself, the help of a person

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the Forms exist in a separate dimension (which, in turn, serves to demonstrate that the soul is immortal): this is all the text states, all that suffices for Plato, and all that ought to suffice for us as well. Still, the fact remains that recollection is also the metaphysical assumption that, like an implicit guiding thread, orients dialectic towards the grasping of the truth (see Trabattoni 2016, pp. 60–63); but it is only a metaphysical condition that makes knowledge possible, not a method of research (hence, it is utterly misleading to ask "how it works").

17 See Thein 2001, p. 270.

18 The close connection between the doctrine of the Forms and the immortality of the soul is perfectly evident in the *Phaedo*, as scholars have noted. Consider for instance Gallop 1975, p. 97, who is wrong, however, to argue that this theory is never demonstrated in the dialogue, since Plato gives proof of the existence of the Forms at least twice: here, in the discussion on recollection, and further on, in his answer to Cebes (see ch. 7). On the transcendental and metaphysical nature of the Ideas, see Gerson 1999, Kelsey 2000, and Dimas 2003 (esp. p. 214).

that had the same experience as me and is able to remember it, etc; (4) if these devices succeed in their aim, the result is not only that I can remember what I previously forgot, but also that I have the feeling of having already known in the past what I am now remembering. Take the example of Simmias and his portrait: the person who sees the portrait and is reminded of Simmias himself will thereby get in touch with his actual lived experience, and will acknowledge this past experience as something that has actually occurred in his life. Clearly, however, the same does not apply to the recollection which Plato speaks of: the case of someone who sees sensible things that are the same and 'remembers' sameness itself. This experience does not include the acknowledgement of any previous experience (i.e. of the moment in which the soul saw sameness itself prior to its embodiment).[19] If the opposite were true, Plato's recollection would be akin to the sort of ecstatic experience that Pythagoras was said to enjoy (and which allowed him to recall his past lives).

Platonic recollection, indeed, is 'recollection' only inasmuch as it is the knowledge of something that must have been previously known as a matter of fact, without subjective implications. But recollection would be a special method of enquiry only if these subjective implications were in place. Since, however,

19 Centrone is surely right in maintaining that the slave-boy's act of recollection depicted in the *Meno* does not fit the "phenomenology of remembering" (Centrone 2011, p. 416). But there are no reasons, either in the *Phaedo* or in the *Meno* (or even in the *Phaedrus*), to believe that Plato understood a fully analogy with the phenomenology of current memory as being essentially implied by 'his' recollection. As rightly noted by Bostock 1986, p. 62, the idea that we truly remember what we previously knew does not really come into play in this argument. The examples proposed in the *Phaedo* that respect this analogy (for instance, Simmias and his portrait) are clearly cases of "recollection"; but this does not preclude that cases in which psychological awareness is absent are cases of recollection too. "Remember", besides, is not the only verb used by Plato without making a significant distinction depending on the awareness or unawareness of the subjects involved. Take for instance *pseudomai* in the *Hippias Minor*, which is also used in cases in which the subject is not aware that he is telling something untrue; or *boulomai* in the Gorgias, where the tyrant 'didn't do what he wanted', despite of the fact that he consciously believes to have done exactly what we wanted. As far as recollection is concerned, what matters is that human current acts of knowing force us, on the basis of reasoning, to find for them some justification by resorting to a past experience, even if this experience is not recognized as such. This broad kind of "remembering", contrary to what Centrone maintains (2011, p. 421), is quite enough to fulfil the *Phaedo's* requirement, according to which recollection involves "knowing in advance" (*proteron epistasthai*). There are, for each of us, a lot of pastpieces of knowledge that we are sure, for various reason, to have had, even if we can't remember them, i.e. we are currently unaware of having had them. Such awareness does not play any role in Plato's argument: to state that knowledge is nothing but recollection it is enough to show that we have compelling reasons to think that acquiring knowledge is not producing it from scratch, but recovering knowledge we already had in the past.

they are not, the "method" of recollection ends up being nothing less and nothing more than the normal Socratic method consisting in questions and answers, namely dialectic. This is the case, indeed, with the experiment with the slave-boy in the *Meno*: Socrates merely poses questions to him as usual, without attempting in any way to evoke the boy-slave memory with special mnemotechnical devices. But precisely these special devices should be the distinguishing feature of recollection as a method.[20] Since, however, these devices do not exist, if recollection is a method of enquiry this method is dialectic, and recollection and dialectic end up being the same thing. If, on the contrary, recollection and dialectic are two different things, then recollection cannot be a method of enquiry.

4 Recollection as an Explanation for Human's Middle Condition

Based on what has been argued so far, it is clear that the knowledge of the Forms is neither the kind of knowledge which recollection assumes to be present in *all human beings*, at least in principle, nor the kind of knowledge that *philosophers alone* can attain. The kind of knowledge which the doctrine of recollection assumes to be present in *all human beings* is the possibility of perceiving a qualitative divide between the equal sticks and stones (that are equal and non-equal at the same time) and the equal 'itself' (that is nothing but 'equal', not suffering any alteration depending on time or one's perspective), namely between the real and the ideal, the conditional and the unconditional, etc.;[21] the kind of knowledge Plato grants *philosophers alone* is the capacity to identify the condition of possibility for the kind of knowledge available to *all human beings* (the awareness of the divide): the fact that their souls (and hence the souls of all human beings, not just those of philosophers) knew the Forms *before* becoming embodied. And if the argument is truly designed to show that

20 See *Phaedo* 74c13–42: the necessary and sufficient condition for speaking in terms of recollection is this and this alone: that the sight of one thing reminds us of another. The hypothesis that recollection is a learning method may have been inspired precisely by the aforementioned examples, in which recollection seems to imply a genuine act of remembrance. But even if we were to take these examples literally, the kind of activity stimulated by *anamnesis* would coincide not with the exercising of dialectic, but rather with the ordinary forms of introspection that we resort to when seeking to recall forgotten experiences. It goes without saying that in Plato we find no suggestion that such practices may constitute a method of knowing the Ideas.

21 This does not mean that all human beings immediately perceive this divide; indeed, it is possible that some (or many) people never grasp it at all (see Dimas 2003, pp. 204–205).

all human beings must have known the Ideas *before* birth (in the sense that *it is impossible for human beings not to have known them*), it is evident that no one, *neither all human beings nor philosophers alone*, is in possession of that knowledge now (otherwise, as already noted above, the argument for showing that human beings *must* have gained this knowledge *before birth* disappears).

This argument rests entirely on the subtle balance between two opposite extremes, either of which would be fatal. If the soul did not perceive any divide between conditional empirical realities, such as what is partially the same or beautiful, and their perfect versions, there would be no ground to claim that at the time of its embodiment the soul possesses a knowledge it acquired previously. Conversely, if the perception of this divide derived from a knowledge of the original reality already available to the soul in its disembodied condition, the argument – as already noted – would have no metaphysical significance, since there would be no reason to confine the previously acquired knowledge to a separate dimension. In other words, the doctrine of recollection can only apply to the desired metaphysical level if we admit the coexistence of *euporia* (a certain knowledge of universals) and *aporia* (an inevitably incomplete knowledge of universals) at the physical-mundane level.[22] Should the second condition no longer hold, the divide between *euporia* and *aporia* would also cease to be, and with it the need to bridge such a divide with the metaphysical hypothesis that constitutes the aim of the whole demonstration, namely: the separation of the Forms from sensible reality and the existence of a soul which has known them prior to its embodiment.[23]

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22 In a way, this coexistence constitutes one of the keys to interpreting the dialogue: see, e.g., 84c–d, where Socrates uses the verb *aporeîn* twice, and the verb *euporeîn* once. Bostock 1986 (esp. p. 98) rightly notes that this condition of ambiguity finds a counterpart, for Plato, in the distinctive ambiguity of the Socratic question, which reveals the embarrassing fact that, on the one hand, the person who answers has some idea of the meaning of the terms involved (usually with reference to values such as courage, justice, beauty, etc.) but, on the other hand, cannot put forward any universally valid paradigm or definition; and it is precisely in the light of this that Socrates comes up with the idea of recollection, which is to say the notion that the souls knew these paradigms before their embodiment but then lost this knowledge at birth. See Trabattoni 1998, pp. 119–123 (reprinted in Trabattoni 2020, pp. 120–124).

23 If this metaphysical dualism constitutes one of the cornerstones of Platonic metaphysics, it is clear that, on the one hand, there is no reason to claim that Plato eventually abandoned the doctrine of recollection; and, on the other hand, that a certain established picture of Platonic epistemology and ontology, according to which ideal objects are fully accessible to man in his mortal condition (be it via intuition or via definition) must be abandoned (see Trabattoni 2006, 2010, 2016, ch. 11).

All this implies that the perception of the divide goes hand in hand with the impossibility of clearly explaining what it consists in. But is this a plausible condition? Or is it rather the case that the perception of the divide between the original reality and its copy entails full and complete knowledge of the original reality itself? The problem is actually easy to overcome. In order to realise that a given object is not the perfect, authentic and original exemplar of its kind, there is no need to have full and actual knowledge of the original reality – the kind of knowledge, that is, which allows us to pinpoint each and every form of identity or difference. For instance, having often visited the Louvre, I can be reasonably sure that a given painting is not the *Mona Lisa,* even though now that I do not have the original work before me, I cannot quite explain why – i.e. I cannot precisely define in what respects this work differs from the original one. Much the same argument applies to the difference between sensibles and Forms. According to Plato, in order to prove that the soul saw the Forms before its embodiment, we only need to show that when we perceive a sensible thing, we also perceive its imperfection and incompleteness. Ultimately, this is a very common experience, which is not at all difficult to understand: in seeing a given man or woman, I might find myself saying that he or she is the most beautiful man or woman I have ever seen; this not only means that I have seen beautiful things and not beauty itself, but also – and most importantly – that I am well aware of the divide between what is very beautiful, yet only in a conditional way, and what is unconditionally beautiful. Now, even if we cannot say what this divide consists in exactly, the fact remains that its perception on my part must necessarily have an appropriate cause. And given that in his mortal condition man has no access to anything unconditional, this cause must be attributed to an otherworldly existence.[24]

5 Meno *85c–d*

The interpretation of recollection I have suggested connects this theory with a context that we can call 'hermeneutic' in a broad sense. The problem this theory is called to solve is, in other words, the problem of the origins of

24 It is worth noting that my reconstruction is not intended to show that the argument is consistent on the logical level. It would be possible to reasonably question all its steps. And I believe that Plato himself was aware of this. Yet, contrary to what Ebert 1994 argues, this does not at all mean that Plato is criticising a weak argument, which he does not share; rather, it means that he was confident of the fallibility of every *logos*, including this one.

knowledge: how is learning possible, understood as a transition from not knowing to knowing, when in the absence of previous knowledge learning and teaching have no ground to draw on? Plato points to attention to this problem, in my view, through the eristic paradox of the *Meno*; and confirmation that the underlying question is precisely that of the foundation of knowledge is offered by Aristotle, who in some passages of the *Analytic* explicitly quotes the *Meno* in this regard.[25] The discussion of recollection found in the *Meno*, however, is also the text most closely examined by those scholars (such as Scott)[26] who understand this theory as a method to regain full knowledge of the Ideas. We have already briefly examined Scott's thesis in the previous pages, and we cannot discuss his interpretation of the *Meno* further here, but there is a passage in this dialogue that the scholars just quoted (including Scott himself) deem crucial for supporting their position. This passage deserves to be scrutinised with some precision, as it can be shown, as I am going to do, that Scott's interpretation is grounded in a faulty understanding of the text. Let me firstly quote the lines in question in Scott's own translation:

> SOC. At present, these beliefs have just been stirred up in him like in a dream. But if someone questions him about the same matters in many occasions and in many ways, you can be sure that he will end up with as exact knowledge of them as anyone. (85c9–d1)[27]

According to Scott, this passage points out that everyone can move, if questioned in the right way, from 'opinion' to 'knowledge' ("Socrates says that the boy can attain knowledge of geometry").[28] Recollection is the method of enquiry suitable for achieving such a result; not, as I have tried to show, the condition that makes possible any kind of apprehension or knowledge, opinion included (*doxa*, in Scott's opinion, does not require any previous knowledge).

The passage in question, however, does not allow for such a claim. Scott, in fact, takes the sentence:

> You can be sure that he (the boy) will end up with as exact knowledge of them (the boy's beliefs) as anyone.

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25 *APr*. II, 67a21–26, *APo*. I, 71a29.

26 Besides Scott 2005, pp. 106–106, see for instance Ferrari 2016, 2020.

27 ΣΩ. Καὶ νῦν μέν γε αὐτῷ ὥσπερ ὄναρ ἄρτι ἀνακεκίνηνται αἱ δόξαι αὗται· εἰ δὲ αὐτόν τις ἀνερήσεται πολλάκις τὰ αὐτὰ ταῦτα καὶ πολλαχῇ, οἶσθ' ὅτι τελευτῶν οὐδενὸς ἧττον ἀκριβῶς [d] ἐπιστήσεται περὶ τούτων.

28 Scott 2005, p. 106.

as if its meaning were:

> You can be sure that he will end up with an *exact knowledge* of them, *as exact as the knowledge of them anyone has*.

This sentence instead expresses no more than a simple correlation:

> You can be sure that he will end up with *a knowledge of them no less exact than the knowledge anyone has*.

Socrates does not say, therefore, that the slave-boy or anyone else actually has (or could have) an exact knowledge of geometry, but he says that even a slave-boy who has never learned geometry, if questioned in the right way, could eventually achieve a knowledge of geometry not inferior to (no less exact than) that of anyone else (clearly hinting at the Athenian educated class, who, as in the case of Meno in 82e, know geometry because they have learned it). In other words, it is a question not of the degree of competence in geometry that the boy, other people, or both can achieve in absolute terms, but of the comparative degrees of competence that the slave-boy can attain in relation to anyone else. This outcome is indeed precisely the thesis Socrates has tried to demonstrate through the experiment of the slave-boy carried on until this moment. The basic premise of the experiment is that the subject is a human person who has never learned geometry. Unsurprisingly – and Socrates stresses this point very carefully – he firstly chooses a slave (and not, of course, one of his friends or fellow citizens), and secondly makes sure that the boy has never received an education (Meno can confirm it, since the slave was born in his house, 82b). Thus established, the experiment can begin.

The normal situation – namely, one that does not demand recollection as a condition – is that a person educated in geometry will find the correct answers to Socrates' geometrical questions, while the uneducated slave-boy will not. But, as shown by the experiment, this is far from being the case. It is a truism that the educated person has a much better knowledge of geometry than the slave. In particular, the educated person could answer' Socrates questions promptly, without the hesitations, mistakes, and the long period of trial and error which the slave underwent. It is for this reason that Socrates says that it is necessary to question the slave in the right way for a long time, because he, in contrast to the educated person, cannot find the correct answer immediately, on the basis of what he has previously learned. He instead requires special training. This is the reason, again, why Socrates, in the sentence quoted above, says that the slave-boy's beliefs until now "have just been stirred up in

him like in a dream": because in the first steps of his training, the knowledge he already has is made up of sporadic and apparently random statements, which the slave is unable to evaluate by himself. According to Socrates, things will improve provided that the training is carried out in the right way and for as long as necessary. But since at the end of such training the slave-boy can attain a degree of geometric skill that is in no way inferior to that of anyone else ("he will end up with a knowledge of them no less exact than the knowledge anyone has"), it is clear that the difference between the slave-boy and others is the result of training, not knowledge. As far as pure knowledge is concerned, i.e. giving the correct answers to questions, the slave-boy and educated people are perfectly equal. But while the case of more or less educated people is not decisive, because nothing prevented them from acquiring the knowledge they have through their schooling, the case of the slave-boy is clear. Since he has never learned geometry in his present life, neither before nor after meeting Socrates (as Socrates restricts himself to asking him questions), he must therefore have learned that which enables him to discover the right answers before his birth.

In this way, Plato has achieved the result which the experiment with the slave-boy was aimed at: to show that the theory of recollection is necessarily true. Training is the occasional cause of the reactivation of prenatal knowledge both in educated and non-educated people: for the former, the training is learning geometry; for the second, Socrates' questions. When Socrates asks, a few lines after the passage quoted above, whether "recovering knowledge for oneself that is in oneself" is recollection or not, he openly discloses the meaning of the experiment with the slave-boy that he is carrying out. He refers to what the slave-boy is proving capable of doing now, both before and after Socrates' interruption, namely recovering pieces of knowledge from his prenatal experience. Socrates wants to stress here, exactly as he does in the *Phaedo*, that what the non-philosopher deems a case of learning is in fact a case of recollecting. The slave-boy, indeed, learn anything inasmuch as his knowledge does not come from outside, but exists in itself and is recovered from himself. The meaning of Plato's *anamnesis* is contained in its entirety in the sentence "knowing / learning *is* recollecting": as in the *Phaedo*, in the *Meno*, too, the theory of recollection, far from being a method of enquiry, is simply the philosophical doctrine that reveals (for philosophers only, of course) the reality behind what non-philosophical people wrongly deem learning to be.

This way of interpreting *Meno*'s passage is not only, in my opinion, the most natural and obvious one, but the only one capable of preserving a minimum of coherence between the *Meno* and other dialogues. The basic presupposition of Scott's interpretation is, as we saw, that both the slave-boy and anyone else "can attain knowledge in geometry". Moreover, as according to him

geometry is only an example intended to outline the correct method of philosophical enquiry ('recollection'), this knowledge must be extended to all the domains of the philosophical enterprise. One cannot help but ask, however, how and why this astonishing epistemological optimism, or 'egalitarianism' (to use Scott's own word),[29] could be consistent with the opposite attitude, which absolutely prevails in Plato's writings.[30] Isn't this surprising and un-Platonic epistemological 'egalitarianism/optimism' a clear sign that the interpretation of the passage in question cannot be the right one?

6 Episteme and Doxa

Another, much broader question to answer, in order to establish if Scott's interpretation is plausible or not, is whether – and, if so, to what extent – it is possible to draw, in Plato's philosophy, a clear-cut separation between *doxa* and its own objects (different from the objects of *episteme*) and *episteme* and its own objects (different from the objects of *doxa*). I think, in rough agreement with Gail Fine (specifically, regardless of whether this does or does not imply the rejection of the so-called Two Worlds Theory), that it isn't. This is a key point in my overall interpretation of Plato, on which I have dwelled at length in my writings; it was rather pointless, then, to spend too much time in expounding it here as well.[31] I will therefore restrict myself here to some general considerations. As far as the divided line of the *Republic* is concerned, an unambiguous difference can be found between *doxa* understood as sense perception and *episteme* understood as the intellection of non-material entities. This passage seems to state the absolute impenetrability between *doxa*, *episteme*, and their corresponding objects. But on the one hand the divided line is not Plato's only treatment of epistemology, and on the other sense-perception is not the only meaning of *doxa*, according to Plato. There are in

29 Scott 2005, p. 106. Scott is followed by Ferrari, who speaks of "a sensational declaration of philosophical optimism, that come very close to a real equalitarianism" (Ferrari 2016, p. 60).

30 Ferrari is fully aware that it is quite implausible to ascribe such an equalitarian optimism to Plato. Thus he supposes, following Centrone's suggestions (Centrone 2011, p, 413), that Socrates is here provoking Meno's arrogance, or is intentionally exaggerating the point in order to amplify the idea of a transition to a higher level of knowledge. This explanation strikes me as far too vague and speculative to be acceptable, particularly considering that there is an interpretation of the passage that can supply a simple and fully "Platonic" explanation.

31 See, e.g., Trabattoni 2016.

fact a lot of cases where *doxa* does not mean 'sense perception', but 'opinion/judgement', no matter whether its objects are tangible or intelligible entities. This is the normal meaning of *doxa* in dialogues such as the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*. But there are some relevant occurrences of it even in the *Republic*. At *Resp*. III 413a7–8, for instance, Socrates asks "don't you think that to opine (*doxazein*) the things that are is to possess the truth (*aletheuein*)?" (tr. Shorey).

But if it is true that, according to Plato, *doxa* concerns not only sense perception and tangible things but intelligible ones as well, then it is no longer possible to confine *doxa*, as Scott pretends, to the poor kind of knowledge that human beings, included the slave-boy, can attain without recollection. On the contrary, it is easy to suppose that *doxa*, in this sense, is nothing but the somehow inaccurate knowledge of intelligible entities that the soul must be content with after its fall into the body. If this is the case, it becomes clear why recollection cannot be the method of enquiry capable of turning *doxa* into *episteme*. The function of recollection, in fact, is quite the opposite, namely to explain why human intellective knowledge, if only in some sense, can never exceed the boundary of *doxa*. No matter how accurate the memory of an object may be, it cannot help but fall short of the knowledge capable of grasping it directly, without the need for the mediation of memory and *logos*. This does not mean that the initial *doxa* deriving from recollection, with which everyone is equipped (including completely uneducated people such as the slave-boy, as shown by Socrates' experiment), cannot be improved through the exercise of enquiry and the correct use of dialectic. It is only important to bear in mind that, according to Plato, such improvements are not the acquisition of fresh knowledge which the mind never possessed before (the 'eristic paradox' reveals that this is impossible) but are rather the recovering of knowledge that the soul already possessed before its embodiment.

Later in the passage from the *Meno*'s we began with, there is a very significant clue that points in the direction I have attempted to outline. With reference to the degree of education the slave-boy has attained up until that point, Socrates speaks of "the knowledge (*episteme*) that he has now" (85d9, tr. Scott). This is the second alarm-bell (after the highly unlikely ascription of an epistemological equalitarianism to Plato) that should lead us to reject Scott's interpretation. This statement, indeed, in clearly inconsistent with Scott's supposition according to which the slave-boy has nothing more than *doxa*, and more generally with the idea that *doxa* and *episteme* rule each other out. Scott's solution, adopted by other scholars as well and defended by him against G. Fine's objections (Scott 2005, p. 110), consists in distinguishing between the *episteme* the slave-boy can actually obtain at the end of his training and the latent *episteme* he possesses at this time of the experiment. I couldn't find any

hint in the text, however, referring to such a distinction. I think, in fact, that it is not possible to identify the correct interpretation of this text unless one takes into consideration that *doxa* and *episteme*, when *doxa* means 'judgement' and not 'sense perception', are correlative notions which are mutually interwoven.

Let me clarify this point with some elaboration. According to the *Phaedrus* version of recollection, all souls who are destined to enter a human body have necessarily seen the Forms during their supracelestial life.[32] As a consequence, every human being is born equipped with the previous experience of having known the Forms, even if at the moment of birth this knowledge is forgotten. One's memory begins to awaken when one acquires the capacity to make use of *logos*, and hence to formulate *doxai*.[33] In Plato's epistemology, there is indeed a close connection between *doxa*, understood as judgement, and *logos*; and it is not a coincidence that the only ability that the slave-boy in the *Meno* is supposed to have from the outset is speaking and understanding the Greek language. It is obvious that the *doxai* of a human being lacking any education, as actually happens to the slave-boy, can only be occasionally true. Moreover, this human being cannot discern the truth, when it appears, and even less explain why some propositions are true and others are false.

Therefore, we can say that this unqualified *doxa* is all the knowledge (*episteme*) he has. We can call this *doxa* the 'ground zero' of *episteme* (E_0). This basic level of knowledge can obviously be improved through education, for instance through the dialectical exercise to which Socrates submits the slave-boy. In this way, the uneducated human being can move from E_0 to E_1, E_2, E_3 ... E_n. When Socrates speaks, in the passage from the *Meno* under discussion, of "the knowledge that the slave-boy now has", he is referring precisely to one of these degrees of "E". Socrates is completely justified in calling this degree *episteme* since *episteme*, as much in Plato as in ordinary Greek, means 'knowledge'; and E_1, E_2, E_3 ... E_n represent precisely "the knowledge the slave-boy has" at moments 1, 2, 3, n. But E_1, E_2, E_3 ... E_n are not less *doxai* than *epistemai*, for the very reason that they represent the *doxai*, or opinions, that the slave-boy has at moments 1, 2, 3, n. It is clear that in moving from E/D_0 to E/D_n the level of knowledge increases, inasmuch as the *doxai* are gradually better argued and better defended against objections and doubts. But the time never comes in which *episteme* and *doxa* are completely separated, leaving episteme fully free of *doxa*, because this is precisely what the 'theory of recollection' declares to be impossible: the *episteme* of intelligible realities the soul acquires before the birth of the human being cannot help but become *doxa* after the soul enters the body; and

32 *Phaedr.* 249b, 249e.

33 Cf. *Theaet.* 189e4–190a6.

the *doxa* of intelligible realities which the soul possesses during the life of the human being can become *episteme*, in the strict sense of the word, only when the soul and body separate again (namely, when the human being dies).[34]

In the explanation we have just suggested, the interweaving of *doxa* and *episteme* we find in the dialogues ceases to be the effect of a philosopher's inability to observe the rules he himself has established, but become exactly what we should expect as a consequence of the theory of recollection. The theory of recollection implies, in Russel's terms, a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance (which, according to Plato, fits the standard of the *episteme* in the strict sense, but is only available to the soul when it is separate from the body) and knowledge by description (that, according to Plato, can never exceed the limits of a well-argued *doxa*). This distinction between two kinds of knowledge, direct and perfect in the former case and indirect and imperfect in the latter, is well-attested in Plato's writings, as I have attempted to show many times. But there is a significant clue in the *Meno* itself, not by chance inserted in a section in which Plato is discussing the relationship between *episteme* and *doxa* (97a ff.). "Why – G. Fine asks – does Plato say that only the traveler can know the way to Larissa?"[35] This question can be coupled with the passage of the *Theaetetus* (201a–d) in which Socrates affirms that only eyewitnesses can be credited with 'knowledge' (*episteme*).[36] Once again, as in the case of the alleged equalitarianism/optimism of Plato's epistemology, we are faced with a case that should persuade scholars to give up some of their deep-seated prejudices: is it really plausible that Plato, both in the *Meno* and in the *Theaetetus*, intends to say that the referential model of knowledge (*episteme*) is sense-perception? Obviously not. In fact, travelers (*Meno*) and eyewitnesses (*Theaetetus*) are introduced as reference models not for knowledge understood as 'sense perception', but for knowledge understood as 'knowledge by acquaintance' (or direct knowledge: "knowledge requires some sort of first-hand understanding"),[37] which is what sense perception too clearly is. But since, according to Plato, the soul can only actually become acquainted with the Forms when detached from the body, it becomes easy to understand why human beings, in their present lives, can never attain an *episteme* completely free of *doxa*.

The epistemological framework we have just sketched allows us to solve a problem which has often been addressed to those who understand the

34 See ch. 2.
35 Fine 2004, p. 44.
36 On this topic see Trabattoni 2018, pp. CXXIV–CXXVIII and n. *ad loc.*; Trabattoni 2022.
37 Fine 2004, p. 44.

recollection theory not as a method of enquiry, but as the (metaphysical) solution of the eristic paradox raised in the *Meno*. The reference to pre-natal knowledge cannot really solve the paradox, but simply send back it to the soul's previous condition: how can the disembodied soul learn something from scratch, without reiterating the paradox in the same form?[38] The distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description resolves this problem. The puzzle concerning the origins of knowledge refers only to the latter, because only knowledge by description requires precognition, whereas knowledge by acquaintance does not. Take the case of sense perception (which, as we have seen, is a good reference model for knowledge by acquaintance according to Plato). Physical pain acts on our consciousness from the very first time we experience it: no previous experience or knowledge is required. We simply begin to feel pain. Previous experience or knowledge is required, however, in order to provide a verbal description of it. For instance, I can sensibly say "I feel pain" or "my pain is rheumatic" only if I have previous knowledge of what 'pain' and 'rheumatic' mean. Plato's theory of recollection is therefore not concerned with the regress argument, because knowledge of the Forms that the soul is supposed to have had before its embodiment is "knowledge by acquaintance", not "knowledge by description".[39] As clearly shown by the version of the recollection theory expounded in the *Phaedrus*, Plato claims that, in the *hyperuranion* world, the souls 'see' the Forms in the same direct way as human beings see tangible things in our present world. To those who opine that such a theory is ingenuous, or even ridiculous, I take it upon myself to reply that even if this were true, it would not be a sufficient reason to deny that it is *Plato's* theory.

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38 See, e.g. Ross 1951, p. 25; Bostock 1986, p. 109.

39 Cf. Gallop 1975, p. 133: "The Recollection doctrine therefore [against Ross' remark] points to a direct and immediate knowledge of the Forms".

CHAPTER 6

Harmony

1 The Soul as Harmony: The Pythagorean Background

From *Phaedo* 78b onwards, Socrates sets out to demonstrate the immortality of the soul for the third time, in response to Simmias and Cebes' recurrent uncertainties.[1] He develops an analogical reasoning that runs as follows: as the soul is most like "the divine and immortal and intellectual and indissoluble …" (80b), it is perfectly logical to assume that it is immortal and indestructible. Against this last proof, and against Socrates' mode of reasoning, Simmias raises the following objection (85e–86d): even the harmony[2] produced by a lyre and its strings is divine, invisible, incorporeal, etc.; however, it does not outlive the instrument that has engendered it. Might not the soul too be an attunement of the material components of the human body, and thus be equally subject to death? Simmias essentially notes that the third proof was based on a spontaneous and evocative analogy, and this is not a method ensuring the full congruence of the conclusions, as the example of harmony shows: no one will wish to deny the superiority of music over the material instruments specifically created to produce it from an *axiological* perspective, but this does not entail any advantage from an *ontological* point of view.

The question of the origin of the doctrine expounded by Simmias has given rise to a vast and controversial debate among scholars,[3] which is made all the more complex by Aristotle's mention of the doctrine in both the *Eudemus* and

1 This chapter was first published in Italian in 1988. The English version has been updated and revised, but the bibliographical references are almost the same, because in the most recent literature I have not been able to find significant contributions on the problem at issue here (namely reconstructing the arguments that Socrates lays out between 92e4 and 95a2). The most recent publications are mostly focused on the overall interpretation of the passage, and on the historical and philosophical developments of the doctrine of the soul as harmony (see e.g. Sedley 1995, Caston 1997, Corrigan 2010, Salles 2017). I myself have taken part in this debate with Trabattoni 1993a, 2015, 2020.

2 I have chosen to speak of 'harmony' because this word seems to best express the various meanings of the Greek word, which many other scholars instead translate as 'attunement'.

3 The most widespread opinion is that a more or less close connection is to be found with Pythagoreanism. On this point, see the sophisticated attempt made by Burnet 1911, p. 82, according to whom the theory expounded in the *Phaedo* is a correction of classic Pythagoreanism designed to bring it into agreement with Empedoclean physics, and Barnes 1979, p. 187 ff. Among less widely accepted hypotheses we find those of Archer-Hind 1894,

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the *De anima*.[4] Be that as it may, it seems likely to me that Simmias' theory implies a reference to positions historically upheld by someone. Up until recently it was taken for granted, on the basis of a *Phaedo* passage in which Socrates draws a connection between them and Philolaus (61d), that Simmias and Cebes were Pythagoreans. Actually, however, the only certain information we can infer from this passage is that they were fellow citizens of Philolaus': there is nothing to clearly indicate that they were also his pupils. To this we should add the fact that none of our sources include Simmias and Cebes in lists of Pythagoreans, while Xenophon mentions both among the closest pupils of Socrates'.[5] Plato practically features Simmias and Cebes only in the *Phaedo* (they are mentioned once, as a pair, in the *Crito*, while the *Phaedrus* mentions Simmias alone as someone passionate about speeches). And since Xenophon merely states that they were Socrates' pupils, it is possible that his information derives from Plato himself.[6]

But if it is true that the *Phaedo* passage in question does not imply that Simmias and Cebes were pupils of Philolaus', it is also true that it does not rule this out; in fact, it presupposes some kind of connection between them. After all, it seems to me quite likely "that a doctrine that the human soul is *in some sense* a ἁρμονία was held by the school which said that the whole universe is ἁρμονία καὶ ἀριθμός (Ar. *Met.* 986 a 2)".[7] These are the most evident clues – yet certainly not the only ones – suggesting that in the *Phaedo* Plato sought to present a comparison and mutual engagement between Orphic-Pythagorean doctrines and his own (the merit of highlighting this aspect chiefly goes to Burnet). It seems very likely, therefore, that the theory of the soul as a harmony upheld by Simmias – and endorsed by the concerned Echecrates, even though he is shocked by the Theban's objection – also had a Pythagorean origin.[8]

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p. 64 and Field 1930, p. 179 ff., who speak of a popular, widespread thesis, and that of Bernhardt 1971, p. 60 ff., who points to Heracliteanism (with largely unpersuasive arguments).

4 Aristotle discusses the doctrine with the aim of refuting it in fr. 7 of the *Eudemus* (Ross) and in *de an.* 407b ff., without quoting his source. See Trabattoni 1981 and Charlton 1985. Besides, in *de an.* 404a Aristotle himself attributes to unnamed Pythagoreans a different theory, according to which the soul consists of corpuscles suspended in the air. The doctrine of the soul as a harmony is also discussed (and refuted) by Plotinus (*Enn.* IV 7, 8 (4)), who assigns it to unnamed disciples of Pythagoras'.

5 Cf. Nails 2002.

6 What we know about the chronology for Xenophon and the *Memorabilia* is not inconsistent with the hypothesis that he may have read the *Crito*, the *Phaedo* or both.

7 Hackforth 1972, p. 103.

8 This hypothesis is confirmed by Huffman 1993 (pp. 328–332) and Sedley 1995 (pp. 22–26), according to whom the doctrine of the soul as harmony can be attributed to Philolaus.

If it so, Simmias' objection confronts us with a problem. He does not limit himself to defining the soul as a harmony; it is rather a lengthy and complex argument, and posits a close logical consequentiality between the doctrine expounded at the beginning and the inevitable materialistic outcomes. But, as some scholars have objected, can the Orphic-Pythagorean movement really have upheld a theory about the soul incompatible with the notion of its immortality? It seems clear, then, as Gottschalk noted,[9] that the materialistic consequences of the theory of the soul as a harmony do not belong to the genuinely Pythagorean position, but are drawn by Plato himself. In such a way, he pursues what is, in my opinion, one of the main aims of the dialogue: Simmias' objection (regardless of whether he is a Pythagorean or not) and Echecrates' bafflement (88c–e) show the inadequacy of Pythagorean attempts to prove – by means of dialectically valid arguments – metaphysical and ethical ideas that were as crucial for Plato as they were for the Pythagoreans themselves.[10]

These motivations emerge quite clearly from the first of the three responses by which Socrates seeks to refute Simmias' objection (91e–92d). This is an *ad hominem* argument, directed not so much against Simmias himself (a historically evanescent figure), but rather against the cultural current of which he, in the dialogue, is in some way the spokesperson. For this purpose, Socrates recalls (91e–92a) the consent previously voiced by his interlocutor with regard to the theory of recollection (a consent which they strongly reaffirm). He then moves on to establish a clear-cut distinction: the doctrine of the soul as a harmony is incompatible with recollection. Simmias obviously prefers recollection (connected as it is with transmigration, a crucial theory in Pythargoreanism) to the (probably adventitious) theory of the soul as a harmony. By bringing this first part of the discussion to a close, Simmias highlights not the ethical but the *epistemological* reasons for his choice: whereas the doctrine of the soul as a harmony has taken shape in Simmias' mind (i.e. in the Pythagorean school he represents) "with no proofs, but with a sort of plausibility and outward appeal, which is the basis on which most people believe it too", the theory or recollection "has been provided by means of a hypothesis worthy of acceptance" (92d). It is important to emphasise the significance of certain word choices: on the one hand, we have arguments that are not supported by 'proofs' (ἀπόδειξις), the field of εἰκός ('plausible'), of εὐπρέπεια ('outward appeal'), and of δόξα ('belief'); on the other, we have conclusions reached δι' ὑποθέσεως ἀξίας ἀποδέξασθαι ("by means of a hypothesis

9 1971, pp. 194–5.
10 Cf. Sedley 1995, pp. 12–13; Ebrey 2017, pp. 22–27.

worthy of acceptance") – presumably the theory of Forms, which Socrates had established as the basis of recollection (73b ff.).

With this, we have reached an interesting conclusion. Whereas Simmias had disputed the congruence of Socrates' third proof precisely because it was based on mere analogical assimilation,[11] Socrates turns this remark against Simmias' own objection: the doctrine of the soul as a harmony also proves inadequate precisely because it stems from an intuitive and superficial comparison, and no one has ever evaluated its consequences by means of even the most elementary logic. It may be argued, therefore, that in responding to his interlocutor, Socrates essentially accepts the methodological point on which the Theban's objection was founded, and sets out to investigate the issue of immortality from a strictly theoretical perspective, leaving analogical procedures aside. But if this is the case, will not the third proof too amount to little more than a mere sophism? Not necessarily, because Plato's way of arguing usually entails a range of different languages and theoretical levels (often compatible with the various levels of the interlocutors within his dialogue and of the public more generally): it obeys the rules of logic, but also those of rhetoric. In this respect, K. Dorter has insightfully noted that the argument of likeness to the divine can be seen to fit with the demonstration of the existence of God 'from design' and that, while it may not be logically very rigorous, it is perhaps the most persuasive argument for human beings.[12] Indeed, 'ordinary listeners' seemed satisfied with the third proof; not so the philosophers (here the Platonic metaphor becomes transparent), who were discussing things between themselves in a low voice (84c). In their case, Plato must resort to a very different method, and very different arguments; and it is precisely at this point that the engagement with Pythagorean philosophy comes into play.

Within the cultural context of his day (traditional Homeric-poetic *paideia*, pre-Socratic naturalism, sophism, Isocratean rhetoric, etc.), Plato certainly saw Pythagoreanism as the philosophical current closest to his own thought as far as its underlying ideas where concerned. However, Pythagoreanism lacked reliable methodological and ontological foundations: it relied on myth

11 Cf. Pakaluk 2010. pp. 645–46.

12 See Dorter 1976, p. 299 and 1982, p. 76 ff. This does not mean that Simmias lacks a dramatic profile, distinct from Cebes', as D. Sedley (1995) has sought to show. Rather, what can be ruled out, in my view, is that in the *Phaedo* Plato might be staging "the paradoxical spectacle of Socrates having to persuade the Pythagoreans of the truth of their own doctrine" (Sedley 1995, p. 11). What Plato is staging through the construction of the character Simmias is the retraction that the Pythagoreans would be forced to make, once they acknowledged that the doctrine of the soul as harmony conflicts with their belief in the immortality of the soul.

and on evocative yet not very solid images, without really exploring problems in depths. Plato sets Pythagorean philosophy in contrast to the example of Socrates and his rigorous dialectic, but also to the essential support provided by the philosophy he was developing on the basis of his fruitful relationship with his teacher: the centre of this philosophy (and of the *Phaedo*) is the theory of Forms, which serves as an ontological and epistemological cornerstone.

Socrates, of course, does not stop at this first, easy refutation of Simmias. It is an easy refutation because Plato has merely highlighted an ambiguity which he himself has introduced in the Theban's objection, for anti-Pythagorean purposes – as we have seen. However, in the *Phaedo* Simmias is not a flesh-and-blood philosopher with whom Plato feels the need to engage; rather, he is a character that Plato freely shapes for the purpose of his own engagement with Pythagorean philosophy.[13] Hence, Simmias' objection lives on even without him, in the context of the general assertions that Plato is interested in refuting, even aside from any contingent *ad hominem* polemic.[14] An indication of this break is provided by the powerful conclusions reached by Simmias' assertions in 92d, and by the fact that from this point onwards neither Simmias nor Cebes will really play a significant part in the dialogue.

2 Socrates' Second Argument

From 92e4 onwards, Socrates presents two more arguments designed to refute Simmias' thesis. First of all, it is important to note the structure of the two proofs, which are chiastically intertwined: from 92e4 to 93a10 we find the premises to the first argument, followed by an exposition of the second one (93a11–94b3); finally, we have the conclusion to the first argument (94b4–95b4). This structure is clearly emphasised by the expression τί δέ, which appears precisely to mark a break (92e4, 93a11, 94b4).[15] The reasons for this particular way of proceeding are probably rhetorical. While it is true that Plato's dialectical method aims to touch upon the level of demonstrative *logos*, the dialogical form itself

13 Many of Socrates' interlocutors (Simmias and Cebes, Ion, Euthyphro, etc.) share this function as dialectical devices, to the detriment of their dramatic quality as characters. Clearly, if their speeches are studied from this perspective, it is easy to note their weakness, from both an aesthetic and a logical point of view; but by focusing on the characters' contradictions, the analysis risks completely overlooking the overall points that Plato wishes to make in the context of his dialogical argumentation, which is expressed not only through Socrates, but also through all the specific arguments (be they weak or strong) employed by his interlocutors.

14 Cf. Trabattoni 2011, pp. LVII–LVIII

15 See Gallop 1975, p. 158, Dorter, 1982 p. 99, Ebert 2004, p. 313.

reveals a way of arranging the material so as to make the arguments persuasive. Now, the reasoning which begins and ends in this section is far more straightforward than the central one, and it ensures an effective and direct conclusion. By proceeding in such fashion, Plato has set the most difficult proof[16] within a carefully constructed rhetorical framework that enables him to begin his argumentation with the most basic assumptions and to conclude it with the most persuasive images. The demonstration which serves as a framework considers harmony from a physical point of view, whereas the 'internal' one considers it 'as such', thereby introducing a logical perspective which examines the concept and its implications apart from the sensible realm. This kind of methodological ploy, which is not infrequent in the dialogues, can sometimes limit the preciseness of the arguments and thus deceive interpreters, who in isolating the logical core of the arguments are at times led astray by Plato himself.

The premises to the first argument, which Simmias easily grants, since they simply recall what he himself had stated in the final part of his objection, run as follows:

1. harmony cannot be of a different nature than its components;
2. it cannot do or suffer anything different from what its elements do or suffer;
3. hence, it cannot precede or guide them, but must follow them;
4. therefore, it cannot produce sounds or movements contrary to its parts.

Harmony, in this case, is associated with the notion of 'compound', and we also find a specific reference to the sounds produced by the lyre.[17] This means that Socrates here is noting a particular physical-empirical characteristic of harmony, namely the fact that, with respect to the elements it harmonises, it cannot claim any form of independence: in modern parlance, it only represents an epiphenomenon of such elements.[18]

3 Socrates' Third Argument

Having made this point, Socrates introduces an issue of a completely different sort, shifting the discussion – as previously noted – from the physical to the

16 At 93a13 Simmias replies: οὐ μανθάνω. Cf. 93C9–10.

17 The words that Plato uses are revealing: συνθέσει (83a1) and φθέγξασθαι (93a9); they show that what is chiefly at play here are the materialistic implications of the doctrine.

18 With regard to the term epiphenomenalism (introduced in this context by Taylor 1983), well-founded doubts are voiced by Charlton 1985, 131–32. For a general overview on this problem cf. Caston 1997.

logical plane. This does not change the fact that the groundwork for the transition in question has already been rhetorically laid by the previous assumptions, which it apparently resembles, so much so that many critics have failed to detect any break. The following section is one of the most difficult and controversial passages in the entire corpus;[19] hence, we will examine it in detail in an attempt to clarify its content and textual structure. To this end, it is crucial to develop the analysis on the basis of a translation that supports and justifies my suggestions (93a11–c10).

> "Well then, does not every harmony have the nature of a harmony, inasmuch as it is harmonised?" (A')[20] "I do not understand," he said.[21] "Would it not," said Socrates, "be more completely a harmony and a greater harmony if it were harmonised more fully and to a greater extent, assuming that to be possible,[22] and less completely a harmony and a lesser harmony if less completely harmonised and to a lesser extent?" (A'')[23] "Certainly."

19 Cf. Gallop 1975, pp. 157–158: the section at issue here "is extremely difficult, and its analysis remains highly problematic". The broader and more in-depth comments on this passage (Gallop 1975, Loriaux 1979 and Ebert 2004) confirm this impression: they focuses more on expounding and clarifying the difficulties than on finding out clear ad suitable solutions.

20 τί δέ; οὐχ οὕτως ἁρμονία πέφυκεν εἶναι ἑκάστη ἁρμονία ὡς ἂν ἁρμοσθῇ; (93A11–12).

21 In order to provide a correct interpretation, it is important to draw attention right from the start to this observation made by Hicken 1954 (against Burnet): "The point is really obscure, and οὐ μανθάνω is regularly followed in the dialogues by a restatement of an idea in more specific terms, often coupled with an illustration, not by a new point which leads to the same conclusion" (p. 19). This means that 93a14–b4 (A'') is simply a clarification and simplification of 93a11–12 (A'); hence, strictly speaking, the demonstration could even do without it. By taking this remark into account, we can easily assess the various explanations provided: any reading based on 93a14–b2, regarded as an independent premise, is bound to be wrong.

22 This clause (εἴπερ ἐνδέχεται τοῦτο γίγνεσθαι) does not authorise us to draw any positive or negative conclusion on the matter (see Hicken 1954, p. 16).

23 In the Greek text there is a lack of correspondence between the two cases presented at 93b1–2. In one case, we have μᾶλλόν … καὶ πλείων, which is to say an adverb and an adjective, while in the other we have ἥττων τε καὶ ἐλάττων, which is to say two adjectives. This may be explained as follows: the opposite of μᾶλλόν is, of course, ἧττον; but as the corresponding adjectival form of this adverb exists, it is put in the nominative by attraction. There is also a *varia lectio* (undoubtedly the *lectio facilior*) which gives ἧττον in place of ἥττων. The adjectives, moreover, serve the usual rhetorical purposes, and are designed to help grasp a point that Simmias has not really understood; by contrast, they are quite inadequate to express a well-defined range of degrees within harmony: they only identify generic characteristics that directly apply to harmony 'as such'.

> "And is this perhaps true of the soul? Is one soul even in the slightest degree more completely and to a greater extent a soul than another, or less completely and to a lesser extent?" (B)[24] "Not in the least," said he.
>
> "Well now," said he, "one soul is said to possess sense and virtue and to be good, and another to be senseless, wretched, and bad. Or is this not true?" (C)
>
> Certainly.
>
> Now, what will those who assume that the soul is a harmony say that these things in the soul are, namely virtue and wickedness?[25] Will they say that these are another kind of harmony and a kind of discord? And that the good soul is harmonised and, being a harmony,[26] has another harmony within itself, whereas the discordant soul is itself a harmony and has no other harmony within itself? (C")
>
> "I don't know what to say," replied Simmias. "But it is evident that those who make this assumption would say something of that sort." (tr. mine)

By this point in the argument, all the elements required for the proof have been presented in a way that is not entirely consistent or compelling. Premise C (C' + C") establishes that every soul must be more or less *harmonised*. Premise B, in turn, establishes that no soul can be more or less *this, i.e. soul*. In

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24 ἦ οὖν ἔστι τοῦτο περὶ ψυχήν, ὥστε καὶ κατὰ τὸ σμικρότατον μᾶλλον ἑτέραν ἑτέρας ψυχῆς ἐπὶ πλέον καὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἐπ᾽ ἔλαττον καὶ ἧττον αὐτὸ τοῦτο εἶναι, ψυχήν; The first, μᾶλλον, at 93B5, seems pleonastic, and was excised by Heusde and Dirlmeier. However, there are other passages in the dialogues in which μᾶλλον introduces other comparatives (*Pol.* 259c10 and 288b6; cf. Verdenius 1958, p. 227). The word οὖν at line 4 is not necessarily inferential (as Burnet would have it), but neither is it a purely discursive conjunction as suggested by Hicken, who translates (op. cit., p. 19): "Well, then", completely disconnecting 93a11–b3 from 93b4–7.

25 The text would seem to suggest that there is some connection between believing that virtue is a harmony and endorsing the doctrine of the soul as a harmony. Brémond 1932, p. 69, Bernhardt 1971, p. 110, believe this to be the case. This is certainly a plausible idea, so long as it is not understood in a rigid way: a Pythagorean, who believes the soul to be a harmony in view of the axiological considerations connected with this term, would probably – and precisely for this reason – think that virtue is a harmony. So if the champions of the soul-harmony thesis are credited with the same ethical theory as Plato, it is clear that in this case Socrates is not at all refuting a kind of materialism, but engaging with a culture that must have already shared most of Plato's concerns; on this basis alone – as we shall briefly see – it is possible to draw a balance of the entire argument.

26 It is unclear at first how αὐτήν at line 7 is to be translated (τὴν δὲ ἀνάρμοστον αὐτήν τε εἶναι καὶ οὐκ ἔχειν ἐν αὑτῇ ἄλλην;). I have opted for the solution suggested by Robin in his second version (Robin 1950) and by Loriaux 1975, who take αὐτήν to imply the word ἁρμονίαν; indeed, the concept which the sentence is meant to express is that the bad soul, if it is a harmony, is discordant, even though it is a harmony.

order for the proof to unfold, it is necessary to be able to conclude that, given the hypothesis 'soul = a harmony', the affirmation of C leads to the negation of B, and vice-versa. In other words: a hypothetical soul-harmony, if more or less virtuous (i.e. if more or less harmonised), would be more or less soul, which would be absurd.

How is it possible to claim this? An intermediate step[27] is missing, which Plato has covered with premise A, the most important and most difficult in the whole demonstration, as well as the most misunderstood by commentators. Modern scholars' interpretations,[28] in this respect, fall into two main currents:[29] (1) Acher-Hind's thesis,[30] according to which Plato is 'affirming' the possibility of degrees in relation to harmony, and (2) Burnet's thesis,[31] according to which Plato is instead denying this possibility. Burnet's solution is actually very weak (the soul, precisely *qua* soul, cannot be subject to degrees of harmonisation, etc.), and I will refer here to the extensive refutation of it formulated by Hicken. Worse still is the attempt to revive it suggested by Bernhardt:[32] forced to acknowledge that the impossibility for a harmony to entail degrees cannot be inferred from 93a11–b2 (A), he argues that the principle in question can be inferred from 93b4–7 (B). The assimilation of the soul to a harmony would be a kind of intellectual experiment by which it is possible to infer the absolute and unchangeable nature of harmonies as such.

Burnet's interpretation (which was accepted by, among others, Robin in his 1926 edition) was an attempt to improve upon the explanation put forth by Archer-Hind. This was explicitly regarded as tenuous and incomplete by Archer-Hind himself, yet to this day – with some exceptions – it is the reading

27 Significantly, both Loriaux and Dorter note that a step is missing in the proof. The former (1975, p. 60) writes: "il paraît-il moins évident – à première vue, en tout cas – que pour une âme être plus harmonisée soit l'équivalent d'être plus âme; et pourtant, ce dernier point devrait être établi pour que 93d1–2 constitue une objection a 93c4–6." Likewise, Dorter (1982 p. 104) notes that a step in the proof has an elliptic character ("Since one soul is no more or less soul than another, then no soul is more or less attuned than another"). The explanations adduced by the two scholars do not solve the problem in a fully satisfactory manner: in Loriaux's case, because he does not correctly understand 93a11–b2; in Dorter's case, because de facto he does not include this passage in his reconstruction of the proof.

28 Concerning the ancient debate (Themistius, Nemesius, Olympiodorus, Damaskios, Philoponus, ecc.), see Trabattoni 2015.

29 Cf. Ebert 2004, p. 318.

30 1894, p. 78.

31 1911, p. 95.

32 1971, p. 103 ff.

most frequently presented in commentaries.[33] The interpretation in question falls short in two respects: on the one hand, the main argument seems incomplete;[34] on the other, a phantom argument emerges that foreshadows the conclusion reached at 93b7: harmony can have degrees, but not the soul.[35] These are problems that in some cases – as we have seen (in his extensive commentary, Loriaux comes very close to Archer-Hind's thesis) – can only be overcome by correctly reinterpreting 93a11–b2. This is precisely what Brémond and Hicken have sought to do in the aforementioned articles, with the aim of bringing the controversial passage into play as an integral part of the demonstration. I cannot dwell here on the various steps of these two interpretations. However, I believe that despite the significant improvements they introduce,[36] they are not yet adequate to clarify the logic of the argument, since they fail to effectively connect premise A (which speaks of harmonies) and premise B (which speaks of souls). Finally, Bostock's commentary, too, follows the same line as Archer-Hind:[37] Socrates at first distinguishes the soul from harmony because only the latter can be subject to degrees, but he then goes on to refute a possible case of harmony that might constitute an exception. As we shall see, Bostock's arguments in support of this hypothesis are not entirely persuasive.

4 The Crucial Premise of the Third Argument

Let us set out, then, to discuss premise A. It is divided into two parts (A' and A''), because Simmias proves incapable of understanding it in its more concise and cogent version, thus forcing Socrates to resort to an example. This is actually a perfectly natural difficulty, as Socrates' question, after the previous obvious assumptions about the nature of harmony, suddenly changes the tone to illustrate the logical-categorical concept of 'essence' in a few lines. Indeed, A' means: 'inasmuch as' every harmony 'has the nature' of a harmony, it is

33 Truth be told, much the same scheme had already been presented by the Italian Bonghi, whose fine work dates from 1881.

34 Cf. n. 27.

35 Hackforth 1972, p. 118, writes that after 93b7 the theory appears to have been provisionally refuted, whereas Dorter 1982, p. 101 ff., sets out to disprove this hypothesis. Archer-Hind's hypothesis, which entails the presence of a fourth argument, has recently been accepted by S. Menn (2010, p. 62).

36 This is particularly the case with Hicken, who has identified a grammar rule in 93a11–b3 (op. cit., p. 20), whereas Brémond 1931 by and large remains bound to a physical perspective.

37 Bostock 1986, p. 125 ff.

harmonised.[38] Out of all the translations I have examined, Acri, Apelt, Archer-Hind, Bernhardt, Bonghi, Brémond, Burnet, Capone-Braga, Casertano, Ebert, Fowler, Grube (in Cooper 1997), Hackforth, Hicken, Long, Loriaux, Martinelli-Tempesta, Reale, Robin (1926 Belles Lettres, 1950 La Pléiade), Savino, Valgimigli, Vicaire, Vigo and Wohlrab, I have found Valgimigli's to be the only truly satisfactory one: "ogni accordo non è accordo appunto per questa sua natura, in quanto cioè sia accordo?"[39]

The vast majority of translators understand this passage to mean that the characteristics of each harmony depend on how its elements are harmonised. But in this way not only would the sentence be trivial, but it would become impossible to identify its function in the argument. We can only understand what it means and what purpose it serves, if we admit that at this point Socrates is no longer saying anything about the particular physical nature of harmonies (be they musical or non-musical), but is rather setting out from a logical consideration (harmony 'as such'), and describing the relationship that exists between any subject and the predicate which constitutes its specific essence. As Simmias does not understand him, he adds an example (A"): any harmony, if we grant that it may be more or less harmonised, would be "more or less a harmony", which is to say that it would vary not according to any of its predicates, but as such, i.e. 'according to its essence': for the essence of a harmony consists precisely in its being harmonised (A').[40] Having established this much, we can now attempt to provide a formal reconstruction of the demonstration:

1. It must be possible for every soul to be more or less harmonised (C).

38 From a grammatical standpoint, the particles οὕτως … ὡς indicate various kinds of correlation; but in this case their function is to indicate the 'equal necessity' of two facts that are co-necessary, since one determines the other (or because they determine each other). An analogous case is found just a few lines before, at 92d7–9: "For we have seen that it is *as* (οὕτως) true that our soul also exists before it enters the body, *as* (ὡς) it is true that the reality which is called being itself exists and has a relationship with the soul" (my English translation, based on Reale's Italian one). Moreover, note the strength of the verb πέφυκεν, which has the meaning not of a generic statement, but of 'is by nature', 'has the nature of' (the verb carries the same meaning, for instance, in 102c1). Naturally, the most serious difficulties arise from the fact that Plato cannot yet rely on a technical language to express logical concepts.

39 Valgimigli 1929, p. 116.

40 With regard to this, Valgimigli notes: "Il più e il meno, se possono essere compatibili con l'accordo come quantità e contenuto numerico, – che è il punto di vista di Simmia pitagoreo, – non sono compatibili con l'accordo come qualità e come essenza, e insomma con l'accordo in sé. Così l'anima non può essere altro che se stessa, come l'accordo non può essere altro che se stesso. Ora, ammesso che l'anima, in quanto anima, è accordo, si capisce che non potrà accogliere in sé un più o meno di sé stessa" (pp. 116–7).

2. If it were more or less harmonised (assuming that this is possible), a soul would vary 'in terms of its essence' (i.e. it would be more or less a harmony) (A).
3. But a soul cannot vary 'in terms of its essence' (it cannot be more or less soul) (B).
4. Therefore, the soul cannot be a harmony.

In order for the argument to work, it is necessary to establish two essential points: (a) being more or and less harmonised means being more or less a harmony (i.e. being harmonised is the 'essence' of harmony); and (b) being more and less a harmony means being more and less soul, i.e. varying in terms of 'essence'.[41] Brémond's and Hicken's interpretations somehow succeed in formulating assertion (a), restoring the original correlative meaning of passage 92a11–b2, which refers to it (although – as noted above – Brémond obscures the logical meaning of this premise, adducing misleading physical explanations).[42] But if we do not introduce the concept of essence, which is invariant in all objects and is what makes an object precisely what it is, the meaning of premise A is obscured; most importantly, it becomes impossible to link premise A, which speaks of harmonies, with premise B, which speaks of the soul: why should a soul as a harmony, if it is more or less harmonised, be 'precisely this', i.e. more or less soul? Moreover, it is clear that if we believe that in A Plato is discussing in realistic terms whether harmony is subject to degrees, it becomes impossible to explain this section in a simple and unitary way (to say nothing of the linguistic problems involved).

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41 These important points escaped Bostock 1986, who therefore found in the text an error illustrated by the following example: if all human beings are rational, this does not mean that they cannot be rational to different degrees. But 93a11–b3 is precisely designed to show that a soul, if it were a harmony, would have harmonisation as its essence and not as a predicate; the case of rationality is different, then, insofar as it is an attribute (albeit a defining one). Cf. also Ebert 2004, p. 327. Though he understands correctly A'+A", namely that a soul, as attunement (Stimmung) cannot be "mehr oder weniger *Stimmung* (my emphasis) als andere Seele", thinks that this proves nothing unless it is also proved that "keine Seele mehr oder weniger *Stimmung* hat als jede andere Seele". But, the hypothesis that the soul *is* an attunement entails that "to be an attunement" is the essence of the soul, so that the soul cannot be more or less an *attunement* than other soul for the same reason that it cannot be more or less *soul* than another soul.

42 For instance, Brémond 1932, p. 73 maintains that, given 93a11–b2, a different harmonisation would engender 'another harmony'; this shows precisely that he has missed the logical core of the demonstration: the humanity of a human being, or the 'horseness' of a horse, is identical for all human beings, or all horses; any hypothetical change would simply destroy the specific form of the human being or horse.

Plato's task must now be to explicate the connection between premises A and B, a connection that constitutes the true driving force of the demonstration. Indeed, the subsequent passages set out precisely in this direction (93d1–e10):

> And he replied: "But had we not agreed that one soul is no more or less soul than another? This is equivalent to saying that a harmony is no more and to no greater extent, or no less and to no less extent, a harmony than another, is it not?" (D)[43] "Certainly."
>
> "And if it cannot be more or less a harmony, neither can it be more or less harmonised. Is that so?" "Yes."
>
> "And if it is neither more nor less harmonised, will it participate in harmony to some greater or lesser extent, or to the same extent?" (E)
>
> "To the same extent."
>
> "Then a soul, given that it is neither more nor less soul than another, is neither more nor less harmonised."
>
> "That is so."
>
> "And if this is its condition, then it can no longer participate in discord or harmony."
>
> "No, indeed."
>
> "And therefore, if it is so, could a soul participate a little more in wickedness or virtue than another, if wickedness is discord and virtue harmony?" (F)
>
> "Not at all." (tr. mine)

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43 Schmidt was the first to suggest expunging ἁρμονίας at 93d4. This makes ἁρμονίαν no longer both the subject and the predicate, but just the predicate, as the subject remains that of the previous sentence (the soul): the passage would express the concept that the soul, if it is a harmony, cannot be more or less a harmony. In actual fact, this deletion is not supported by any manuscript, and compelling arguments against it were formulated by Apelt 1920, p. 144, and Verdenius 1958, p. 299, which took into account the new arguments in favour of it adduced by Hackforth 1955, p. 116. From a logical perspective, it makes little difference whether we accept the deletion or not, but it is interesting to note the misunderstanding to which the controversy has given rise: the preservation of ἁρμονίας would appear to disprove the opinion according to which at 93a14–b3 Plato 'affirmed' the possibility for harmony to be subject to degrees and, conversely, reinforces the thesis of those who believe that he 'denied' this. But we already know that the passage in question neither affirms nor denies anything, and it is precisely insofar as it is identified with the soul that harmony cannot be subject to degrees.

The passage is somewhat redundant, as is often the case with Plato, who aims to demonstrate everything down to the minutest detail (often by resorting to a striking image), so as to force his interlocutor to grant his point. Through the letters I have placed at the end of certain passages, it is easy to verify that Plato is here taking up again the three starting premises: D recalls what had already been presented in B, while this time highlighting the relation with A (a hypothetical soul-harmony could not be more or less a harmony, insofar as it could not be more or less soul); E takes up and reverses[44] premise A (a more or less harmonised harmony is the same thing as a harmony that is more or less a harmony; this is the crucial step, because – as we have seen – Plato must prove that a variation of the degree of harmony in the hypothetical soul-harmony would alter its very essence, which would be absurd); finally, F recalls the well-known ethical doctrine to which Plato refers in C. The assumptions made in E and F introduce a subtle variation: the soul-harmony which cannot be more or less harmonised cannot 'participate' in harmony and discord; by this Plato wishes, on the one hand, to approach his definitions of wickedness and virtue from a terminological standpoint and, on the other, to effectively sum up the problem: if the soul is a harmony, this means that harmony is its essence, and that therefore it cannot have harmony as a 'predicate'.

So, contrary to what certain commentators have suggested, it is not true that Plato here is confusing subject and predicate;[45] rather, the point he is trying to make is that we cannot apply to any subject a predicate of the same kind as its nature or essence, for otherwise the predicate in question would overlap the essence itself. For example, it is obvious that a human being cannot be more or less a human being, or more or less 'human': the definition of human being is an accurate and qualitative one, and does not permit any variations of degree. We can also outline Plato's argument from a different vantage point, using the Aristotelian notion of 'substantial movement' (*Phys.* III, 200b15–201a15). This movement consists in the alteration of the essence (= form), and its outcome is generation (of a new substance) and corruption (of the original substance). This is precisely what would happen to the soul-harmony if it were possible for it to be more or less harmonised, namely more or less virtuous/vicious. But this is not the case, because moral vice, as Plato explains in the *Republic* (609c–d), does not have the power to destroy the soul.

44 On the importance of this reversal, which Plato regards as self-evident, see Hicken 1951, p. 21.

45 An objection of this sort is formulated by Verdenius 1958 (pp. 227–8) and Loriaux 1975 (p. 63).

Strictly speaking, the reasoning ends here, after having demonstrated that a hypothetical soul-harmony could not be subject to any moral degrees. But Plato adds something more, ending with a striking image that might help persuade those who have struggled to follow his reasoning (94a1–b3):

> "Even more so, Simmias, according to a correct argument, no soul will participate in wickedness, if it is a harmony; for if a harmony is entirely this,[46] namely harmony, it could not participate in discord."
>
> "Certainly not."
>
> "Then not even the soul, being entirely soul, could participate in wickedness."
>
> "How could it, based on what has been said?"
>
> "Therefore, according to this argument, all souls of all living creatures will be equally good, if souls are by nature equally this, namely souls."
>
> "So it seems, Socrates."
>
> "And do you think that this is correct and that our reasoning would have come to this end, if the theory that the soul is a harmony were true?"
>
> "Not in the least," he said. (tr. mine)

Once again, rhetorical requirements obscure Plato's reasoning: a soul which participates neither in harmony nor in discord is actually neither good nor bad: for it is not a moral subject. But while these concessions made to the art of persuasion were conceived as beneficial deceptions for listeners who had a good disposition but were intellectually unrefined (like Crito), they should not deceive the attentive reader: they do not undermine the coherence of the main core of the argument.

At this point, the phrase τί δέ; marks the end of the second argument and introduces the conclusion of the first argument, the 'external' one: the previous assumptions (points 1–4 on p. 111) have established that every harmony is posterior to the elements harmonised. Now, the psychological experience of each person – which is also confirmed by art and poetry – bears witness to the

46 The Greek text of lines 94a2–4 reads as follows: ἁρμονία γὰρ δήπου παντελῶς αὐτὸ τοῦτο οὖσα, ἁρμονία, ἀναρμοστίας οὔποτ᾽ ἂν μετάσχοι. This passage too, like 93b4–7 and 93d1–4, has a logical rather than physical meaning: as we already know, neither the soul nor harmony can vary as such (qua soul and qua harmony); therefore, being precisely this in an absolute way (παντελῶς, identical in 94a6 and 94a3), harmony cannot participate in discord (the participle οὖσα – as noted by Verdenius 1958, p. 226 – has a hypothetical meaning, and does not affect the individual features of harmonies). What is being highlighted here, then, is a logical characteristic inherent to any subject (a harmony cannot be discordant, a soul cannot be inanimate, etc.).

fact that the soul can resist the stimuli and movements of the body, something which would prove inexplicable if the soul were the harmony of the physical body. Hence, the conclusion must be – once again – that the soul is not a harmony.

To summarise, it may thus be argued that in his 'external' argument Plato takes stock of the theory of the soul as a harmony from the point of view of its patently materialistic outcomes and refutes it as such. In the 'internal' argument, instead, he does not consider the possible meaning of harmony, but sets out to provide a logically more cogent demonstration: leaving aside the materialistic consequences which Simmias refers to in his objection, however we wish to define the concept of harmony, it is clear that a soul cannot be a harmony because, if it were, it could not receive a predicate of the same kind as its essence, which is to say that it could not be more or less harmonised. This is precisely where the difficulty with this demonstration lies, and what makes it so interesting: by resorting to an approach strategy that not yet fully defined, Plato is trying to highlight the concept of essence, or essential predication. Without this linguistic borrowing from Aristotelian logic, the interpreter will remain enmeshed in the physical perspective, and will fail to grasp the ongoing process of conceptual development hidden within the text.

5 The Philosophical Significance of Socrates' Refutation

In an article published in the mid-1960s.[47] while accepting – for the 'internal' argument – an interpretation close to Burnet's (and thus essentially untenable, as we have seen), Geneviève Rodis-Lewis enunciated an extremely interesting thesis with regard to the problem we are investigating. According to this scholar, Simmias' objection can be divided into two main parts, one of which focuses on harmony as something always self-identical and founded on numerical and ideal relations, while the other considers harmony the mere outcome of the combination of distinct material elements. The second of these hypotheses would represent a form of crypto-materialism, while the first would express a meaning of harmony compatible with the Pythagoreans' requirements (which is to say that it is devoid of negative implications with regard to the immortality of a hypothetical soul-harmony). Consistently with this twofold exposition, Socrates' refutation would also be twofold. If these are reasonable suggestions, then Rodis-Lewis' argument can be integrated

47 1965, pp. 441–54.

as follows: while in his first response to Simmias (what we have called the *ad hominem* argument), Socrates leads his interlocutor into contradiction by detaching the two contrasting aspects of his objection, in the other two he refutes, on the one hand, the materialism entailed by a doctrine according to which the soul is a blending of corporeal elements and, on the other, the naive spiritualism of those (the very Pythagoreans) who simply compared the soul to a divine harmony.

The reasons why Plato refutes the doctrine of the soul as a harmony in its materialistic form are quite evident. But if, in one of the three arguments countering Simmias' thesis, Socrates grants a form of that theory compatible with the idea of immortality, what is the real motive for his refutation? First of all, we have a methodological response: the Pythagoreans had not fully investigated the consequences of their theory; Plato simply grants that harmony may be an independent and indestructible substance as an unproven demonstration. But the real response lies elsewhere. Both the 'external' and the 'internal' proof are based on ethical principles; and this is the underlying tension pervading the Platonic dialogues, at least up to the *Republic*: both in the *Phaedo* and in the *Gorgias* (but partly in the *Republic* too), the immortality of the soul itself would appear to be the necessary completion of the ethical dimension. If the soul is a harmony, the following problem emerges: it is progressively reduced, to the point of making it coincide with the emerging figure of the body, and ultimately with non-being.[48] As a result, the ethical determination of the soul leaves no traces on it, and is directly applied to matter. Plato cannot accept this outcome: it would mean having to acknowledge that human nature is entirely determined by its physical constitution; and this would completely forestall his project of ethical-political renewal, which is centred on the Socratic invitation to 'take care of one's soul'. Furthermore, the very concept of (positive and negative) sanction on which Plato bases the notion of coerciveness in the ethical field would lose all meaning: a wicked man would only be guilty because his bodily parts have been "unduly arranged".[49] Therefore, it is necessary for the soul to be, if nothing else, a subject that is independent from the organism's physical constitution.

However, while avoiding epiphenomenalism, it is necessary for the soul to be an 'ethically indifferent' subject as far as its own nature is concerned. It is

48 According to the Peripatetics Aristoxenus and Dicearchus (cf. Gottschalk 1971, pp. 187–8), to say that the soul is a harmony is practically tantamount to saying that it does not exist.

49 I am here drawing upon the expression ("indebitamente disposte") which Dante employs in *Conv.* I, 1.3.

with regard to this point that the Pythagoreanising champions of the theory of the soul as harmony are wrong, in their rash process of assimilation. For while it is true that the soul is akin to the divine, the immortal, the intelligible, etc., this analogy must not be pushed too far: the soul is 'ontologically' divine with respect to the body, but it is 'ethically' neutral with respect to value. Moral determination is not inherent in its nature as such, but depends on the degree of self-purification which each soul has attained. Besides, the mingling of these two points of view is far from random, as it is deeply embedded in the Greek culture of Plato's time: on the one hand, we have the traditional interpretation, which can be traced back to Homer and to the speculation of *physiologoi* and scientists, and which variously sees the soul as the body's quickening principle; on the other hand, we have the Orphic-Pythagorean-Socratic interpretation, which makes the soul the principle that identifies man's innermost personality and consciousness, and is the seat of moral values. Only in the former case is the soul structurally divine 'qua soul'; in the latter case, its divinity depends on man's correct exercising of his free will.

Plato deftly makes his way through the maze of this ambiguity, and bears its consequences – as Aristotle himself was to do (albeit to a lesser degree). However, with the rhetorical shrewdness that distinguishes him, Plato frequently exploits this circumstance by continuing to resort to concepts that help define the soul as a cosmic principle in support of the immortality of moral conscience: consider, for instance, the first and the last demonstration in the *Phaedo*, or the argument advanced in the *Phaedrus* (245c–246a).

In light of all this, it is easier to answer a question that has often been raised by modern scholars: what is the value of Plato's demonstrations of the immortality of the soul? First of all, it is necessary to carefully identify who the subject of the demonstration is (if it is indeed a demonstration). Secondly, it is necessary to prescind from the spurious rhetorical elements that cloud the logical clarity of the argument. Finally, once we have succeeded in isolating the core of the demonstration, we must take full cognisance of the assumptions we previously granted. This is the case with Simmias' refutation: instead of tracking down errors in order to demolish a demonstration that is held to be logically untenable, it is necessary to reflect on the ethical principles that Plato and his interlocutors take for granted, namely that the soul is an autonomous moral subject which is independent of the body and can freely acquire value through its activity. This core, once suitably developed, is capable of generating a whole metaphysical and spiritual system within which both the refutation of materialism and the demonstration of the soul's immortality practically become superfluous. In my view, this is one of the most notable technical features of

the philosophical work carried out by Plato (who in this respect truly proves to be Socrates' best pupil): the extensive and painstakingly woven web of the argument leads us to forget everything that was already included in the assumptions, which are practically never discussed. But – and here is where the disquieting truth of the Platonic method emerges– if we wished to discuss these assumptions today, Plato might perhaps succeed in showing us, too, that they are simply implicit in our behaviours and mental habits – even though we do not realise it.

CHAPTER 7

Causes

1 Methodological Problems

The pages of the *Phaedo* featuring Socrates' response to Cebes' objection (95e–107b) are among the densest in the whole Platonic oeuvre. They appear highly meaningful from a general perspective (according to the common assumption, made as part of what we might call a broad interpretation, that it is in these passages that the crucial transition is made from the sensible to the intelligible, which is to say from the intelligible plane to the metaphysical). Not only that, but the pages in question also offer plenty of food for thought to discuss a wide range of more restricted, yet philosophically equally important, problems, such as: the problem of explaining how generation and corruption occur in the physical world; the problem of causes, their nature, and their functioning; the problem of the role of the final cause; the problem of whether the Forms are causes and, if so, in what sense; the problem of what "second voyage" and "flight into *logoi*" mean; and the problem of method, alluded to by the use of the notion of 'hypothesis'. To all this we should add the complex set of questions regarding the theory of the Forms, the concepts of 'participation', 'presence', 'Forms in themselves', and 'Forms within us', the possible relation between participation and predication (hence, between the logical side of the theory and the ontological), the toilsome genesis of the difference between essential predication and accidental predication, and so on.

Unsurprisingly, the critical literature on this topic is particularly rich, and I will obviously take account of this as far as possible. Still, it is fitting to warn the reader that the aim I have set myself, here as much as elsewhere, is to identify – again, as far as this is possible – *what Plato sought to express* in writing these pages. Indeed, most studies focus on the above-mentioned problems by removing them from their context, either to highlight the shortcomings of Plato's approach, or to make up for them on the basis of sheer hypotheses, and then develop shreds of theory capable of saving both the consistency of the text and its interest for contemporary philosophers.[1] I will confess that I struggle to understand the allure of this kind of operation. For if the interpreter's goal is to grasp the author's intentions, it is clear that the method in

1 See Introduction, p. 1.

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question is wrong. In the list of issues I have drawn above, I have consciously refrained from mentioning the soul and its hypothetical immortality. It is obvious, though, that in the Platonic text all these issues are part of an overall argument that is designed precisely to prove such an assumption; and it is just as obvious that if we lose sight of this goal, we also miss the chance to understand why Plato chose to discuss these very topics, and especially why he chose to discuss them in a particular way (which can easily be deemed inadequate), and not in any other way.[2] If, conversely, the ancient text is chiefly a starting point and opportunity to discuss philosophical problems of interest to contemporary thinkers, then I do not see why we should waste time with archaic and faulty arguments, instead of directly addressing the topic we wish to deal with in the light of more mature conceptions.[3]

Given all this, I will keep to the first horn of the alternative, with the aim of understanding – as far as this is possible – how the argument of the text unfolds. My enquiry, however, will be limited to the first part of the text, namely the one that goes from the introduction of the problem of generation and corruption (96e) to the agreement reached regarding the existence of the Forms (102b).

2 The Causes of Generation, Corruption, and Being

The first question we need to ask is why, in responding to Cebes' objection, Socrates deems it necessary to embark on a general investigation of the cause of generation and corruption (95e8–96a1). Some of the aforementioned approaches do not address this question, because they set out from the implicit assumption that this is a philosophically interesting investigation, worthy of being undertaken in itself (by Plato's Socrates, by Plato himself, by Aristotle,[4] and obviously by us as well). Therefore, what we would be dealing with in these pages is a short Platonic treatise *de generatione et corruptione*.[5] Unfortunately,

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2 See Burger 1984, p. 3: "… no argument can be immediately isolated from its context; its significance, particularly it it is or appears to be unsound, can be grasped only by taking into account its functions in the whole".

3 In spite of his serious negative judgment about Plato's views and arguments (see ch. 1, p. 23, n. 25) J. Barnes emphasises his "capacity so see where a problem lies, the ability to tell a promising line of inquiry and the gift for producing relevant arguments" (1995, pp. XV–XVI). I can hardly understand, however, how Barnes could deem Plato's arguments "relevant" and at the same time "mostly bad, and for the most part … evidently bad".

4 Cf. *Metaph.* A, 991b3–4; *de gen. et corr.* B, 335b10–16.

5 The passage is envisaged in such terms by Vlastos 1969, Taylor 1969, Burge 1971, Stough 1976, Sedley 1998, Ebrey 2014 (among others).

though, as already noted, the text does not authorise us to expect anything of the sort. Rather, what we can expect is for Plato to analyse the problem of generation and corruption only as far as this is required to establish a useful premise for the demonstration of the immortality of the soul.[6] And this is precisely what happens.

Through his objection, Cebes had questioned not the immortality of the soul, which is to say its capacity to survive – even repeatedly – death, understood as the detachment of body and soul, but rather the incorruptibility of the soul as such, as a self-standing substance. Cebes' idea, in other words, is that even if the soul were more resilient than the body, it might still be corruptible. Hence, a study of generation and corruption becomes necessary, in order to establish whether everything that exists is corruptible, or whether we must also posit something that is incorruptible. In the former case, Cebes' objection could not be refuted. In the latter, it could be refuted, in two ways: (1) either by directly showing that the soul belongs to incorruptible reality; (2) or by connecting the soul to another incorruptible reality and inferring its incorruptibility from its relationship with such reality. Option (1), however, is unavailable. Previously, Socrates had shown that the soul is akin to incorruptible reality, thereby admitting that it is *not* identical to it; and the inadequacy of this demonstration is precisely what had led to Simmias and Cebes' objection. So all we are left with is (2). Evidently, it is a matter of demonstrating the existence of the Forms and then of inferring, via other arguments, that this condition allows us to prove the immortality of the soul. Besides, in his reasoning Socrates himself makes it quite clear that this is the aim of his investigation of generation and corruption:

> Well, I'll set about giving you a demonstration of the sort of cause which I've pursued. I'll go back to those things that have been our frequent refrain, and start from them, first hypothesizing that there are such things as a Beautiful alone by itself, and a Good, a Large and all the rest. If you grant me these and accept that they exist, I hope to use them to demonstrate to you the cause, and to discover that the soul is immortal. (100b3–9)

The whole discussion about generation and corruption, and their causes, thus serves one sole purpose: to show *that the Forms exist*. Therefore, we cannot reasonably expect this discussion to deal with something lying beyond such a goal.

6 Upon closer scrutiny, this limit may be seen to be already implicit in the irony of a Socrates interested in physics – a very different Socrates from that described in the *Apology* – as well as in the fact that the *Timaeus* will address the same problem in markedly different terms.

The next step is to understand how the investigation of the causes of generation and corruption can prove the necessary existence of the Forms. Let us start by noting one thing. In embarking on his so-called autobiography, Socrates does not speak merely of generation and corruption, but also of the being of each thing: "That used to strike me as quite sublime: to know the causes of each thing, why each one comes to be, why it perishes, and why it is" (96a9–10). This observation will help us make sense of a problem noted by scholars in the subsequent arguments, where not just becoming is discussed, but also – as it is argued – the belonging of a given property to a given subject.[7] The idea that there is a mingling here of the physical and the logical plane is simply a misunderstanding, if for no other reason but that a clear-cut distinction between these two spheres is incompatible both with the text and, more generally, with Platonic doctrine (where the Forms – as Vlastos rightly notes[8] – simultaneously have logical and metaphysical relevance).

3 The Physical Causes: Socrates' Dissatisfaction

Socrates states that, in order to get to know the causes of each thing, he initially turned to naturalist physics, but that he then abandoned it because he was deeply disappointed by the solutions offered by this kind of research. This disappointment is explained on the basis of six different examples, by which Socrates shows that physical solutions fall short (96d8–97b7):

1. the cause by which a man has put on weight is nourishment (and this cannot be)
2. the cause by which a man is larger than another is the head (and this cannot be);
3. the cause by which ten is greater than eight is two (and this cannot be);
4. if we add unit A to unit B, this addition is the cause of the fact that unit A or unit B becomes two; or of the fact that the addition ensures that A and B, each of which is one, become two. And it is odd that addition can turn one into two;
5. if we divide a unit in two, this unit becomes double, and the cause of this doubling (separation) is exactly the opposite of the cause which in the previous case made one into two (addition);
6. it is unclear how one comes into being.

7 According to Annas, as Socrates' explanation concerns this second state of affairs (a property's belonging to a subject), it is not really a causal explanation at all (Annas 1982, p. 318).

8 Vlastos 1969, pp. 304–305.

What do all these examples have in common? Some critics have stressed the lack of homogeneity[9] (e.g. between cases 1 and 2, where there is no movement of generation and corruption, and cases 4 and 5, where instead such a movement is found). Others have found the common element in the principle – which Plato repeatedly affirms – of the incompatibility of opposites: "no non-F can be the cause of F in x".[10] For example, Julia Annas remarks:

> Forms are explanations … because only they do justice to the intuitive demand that something's being F cannot be explained by something which is the opposite of F, but can only be explained by citing something which is F, and indeed a better example of F than the thing explained.[11]

David Sedley has made a more sophisticated suggestion, yet along much the same lines. First of all, in order for a cause to be appropriate, it must meet the following conditions:

> If x causes anything to be F (whose opposite is un-F)
> (1) x must not be un-F
> (2) x's opposite must not cause anything to be F
> (3) x must never cause anything to be un-F, 121.[12]

Secondly:

> As a step towards understanding why Plato is so fiercely attached to the principle that opposites cannot cause opposites … is an improved grasp of its positive counterpart, the principle that what causes F must itself be F.[13]

A solution of this sort indeed fits examples (1) to (5): the effects (F) produced in the first five cases (leaving aside the sixth, which is not further articulated) are being large (1), being greater (2), being two (3 and 4), being double (5) But the

9 See Stough 1976, pp. 3 ff., who divides the "puzzles" presented in the text into three different groups.

10 As Annas has noted, the hypothesis that the true cause is the Ideas not so much because they are immaterial, but because they meet the requirement that the explanation rule out any contradiction between opposites, is in a way a common assumption among scholars (Annas 1982, pp. 315–316 and n. 14, quoting Burge 1971, Stough 1976, Gallop 1975, and Balla 2021).

11 Annas 1982, p. 317.

12 Sedley 1998, p. 121. An identical emphasis on the opposite properties in Burge 1970, pp. 4–5.

13 Ibid., p. 119.

respective causes (the head, two, addition, and separation) are not F themselves. Hence, we can understand Socrates' reluctance to acknowledge the causes adduced as responsible for the specific effect they are expected to explain.

However, if the question is posed in such terms, the argument risks becoming irrelevant, both from the point of view of its general theoretical value and as regards its role within the demonstration of the immortality of the soul. The principle according to which quality F in x can only be generated by a cause that is in turn F does not seem at all valid on the physical level (as Sedley has noted, it would be easy to find some counter-examples).[14] But in this case it is unclear why Socrates should invoke precisely this principle as a solution to the problem of physical causality: not only would we end up attributing an incredibly naive theory to Plato, but this doctrine would also obviously conflict with the kind of explanations that Plato himself adopts, in the *Timaeus*, to illustrate the dynamics of the natural world. If, conversely, we argue that the principle in question only holds on the logical level, on the one hand the cause in question would be reduced to the conditions that make it possible to assign a given attribute to a subject and, on the other hand, it would be far from clear what the function of this kind of research is in the argument related to the immortality of the soul. In other words, the sought-for cause would be a sort of tautology, more or less as when we say that a thing is red because of the presence of the colour red. But if the aim of the investigation pertaining to the causes of generation and corruption is to identify the existence of an incorruptible reality, then this tautology would be utterly ineffective, as it tells us nothing of relevance in relation to the objective of the argument.[15] I am not denying that

14 Sedley 1998, p. 123. See also Menn 2010, p. 52: the paradox that one could infer from the contrariness of causes has a sophistic character and is actually easy to resolve.

15 In this regard, Vlastos has observed: "When I want to know what makes this figure a square rather than a pentagon, what answers my question is not the *existence* as such of the Form ... but the logical content of his definition" (Vlastos 1969, pp. 306–307, italics in the original). Sedley shares the same perspective. To make up for the bad reputation surrounding the causes (which seem "vacuous") introduced by Plato in the *Phaedo*, Sedley maintains that this kind of explanation can actually be most valuable, as long as it is understood as an invitation to investigate the essence of the thing under scrutiny by finding its definition (Sedley 1998, p. 127). Now, even aside from the fact that no definitions or examples of philosophical problems solved by means of them are to be found in Plato (as Sedley himself acknowledges: pp. 127–128), the approach adopted by Vlastos and Sedley is a revealing example of the incorrect way of proceeding discussed above. If Plato introduced the investigation about generation and corruption in the *Phaedo* with the aim of presenting his doctrine about this topic, his proposal would certainly seem very weak (to quote Annas, it would be "a very limited and idiosyncratic kind of formal explanation": Annas 1982, p. 318), and it might be appropriate to attempt to reinforce it somehow. But given instead that Plato only addresses this issue in order to prove the existence of the

Annas' and Sedley's suggestions are of some relevance to solve the problem. The former, in particular, has the merit of showing that the kind of causes Plato is looking for here must explain the effect as it precisely is. For instance, if the effect is the quality 'x', the Platonic cause is bound to have something to do with 'x' (in a way that for the moment remains unspecified). But there are some difficulties. In the first place, "the principle that opposites cannot cause opposites" applies only to examples (1) to (5), but non to (6), where no opposite is mentioned: as we will see, this shows that the problem at issue here does not concern in an essential way the production of an effect that is somehow opposite to the cause (as in the case '5', where 'division' results in 'doubling'). It concerns, instead, what Plato pretends to be the general rules of any kind of causation. In the second place, I think that Plato's very intention cannot be grasped without moving beyond the bifurcation between the physical level and the logical one, and addressing the whole question on the ontological level – the only level that can really help us establish whether the soul is incorruptible by its very essence. It is worth noting that the modern distinction between 'causes' and 'explanations' (or between physical and logico-dialectical explanation[16]), which is often brought into play by scholars in this regard, is hardly relevant here, for the simple reason that Plato's *aitiai*, namely the Forms, are both 'causes' and 'explanations'.

Another possible explanation of this passage, different from the one referring to the contradictoriness of the causes, has been advanced in more recent years by S. Menn (2010). On the basis of a well-known Epicharmus fragment (B2 DK), which presents remarkable consonances with the *Phaedo*, Menn has suggested that we interpret the passage as a response "to the problem of identity through time, namely the problem of identity across possible situations" (p. 46). The Epicharmus text states that just as by adding a unit to an even number we get something different, namely an uneven number, it is reasonable to assume that a man who gains or loses weight is no longer the same man as before. In the *Phaedo* passage – again, according to Menn – Plato would therefore be showing the need to introduce Form precisely to solve this problem. This is an ingenious solution, yet it does not strike me as a convincing one. The question whether the *Phaedo* is "really concerned with such abstruse questions as the criteria of identity through time" (p. 52) might even be answered affirmatively,

Ideas as a preliminary step to the demonstration of the immortality of the soul, then all these observations become meaningless: what Plato wishes to show is precisely – and simply – what Vlastos denies, namely that one cannot answer the question about the causes by which a given thing is x if not by saying that it participates in form X.

16 See for instance Vlastos 1969. But it is a commonplace in the literature.

as Menn endeavours to show. However, it seems to me that the *Pheado* is raising a rather different problem. Socrates here does not ask: “How it is possible for a subject to remain the same despite the changes it undergoes?”. Rather, what Socrates asks is: “How is it possible for procedures such as division, multiplication, juxtaposition, etc. to produce the appearance of two, one, the big and the small, with which the alleged causes have nothing in common?” Let us search, therefore, for an alternative solution.

4 What Is the Problem?

Let us start by considering the first two examples of fallacious causality proposed by Socrates in the above-mentioned passage. Here he says that the true cause by which a person is larger than another cannot be the head, and that the true cause by which ten is greater than eight cannot be two. Socrates does not explain what makes these causes inadequate, but it is easy enough to hypothesise that he is reasoning as follows. Suppose we are facing two people, one larger than the other by a head’s length, and let us try to list the ‘objects’ we perceive. First of all, we see person A (the smaller), person B (the larger), B’s head (which makes B larger than A), and then all the physical parts of A and B. Is that all? According to Plato, no: for, in addition to all these ‘physical’ things, we also perceive the ‘largeness’ of B and the ‘smallness’ of A. Several passages confirm that according to Plato ‘things’ like smallness or largeness are indeed entities that we perceive when we turn our attention to sensible reality. Consider the *Phaedo* itself, where Socrates expounds the doctrine of recollection through the example of equality. Here Socrates establishes a difference between the ‘equals’ which we ‘see’ in sensible things and equality itself (74c). The idea is that when we see two stones or sticks that are equal, we see the two stones or two sticks through our senses and, in addition to this, perceive a third ‘thing’ through our intellect, namely the ‘equality’ between the two objects. Things like equality, then, have a well-defined ontological characterisation, insofar as they are objects of knowledge for us, just like the sensible objects we perceive through our senses[17]. Besides, this doctrine is also clearly expressed in the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates shows that knowledge pertaining to the sensible (e.g. to sounds and colours) always goes hand in hand with knowledge pertaining to given universal properties that

17 It is worth recalling that in the *Sophist* the minimum requirement for something to be counted as ‘being’ is for it to be affected by something (247e). This also applies to the special case of affection, which consists in ‘being known’ (248d) (namely, being identified as an independent entity, distinguished from the context where it appears).

are just as much an object of knowledge for us, as in the case of being, sameness, difference, unity, duality (185b2: note the similarity with the examples in the *Phaedo*), similarity, dissimilarity, and so on.[18] Given that the properties just mentioned are objects of knowledge, they must necessarily possess an ontological status of their own, and hence be subject to the conditions generally governing objects that truly exist. One of these conditions, discussed in the *Phaedo* passage in question, is the existence of a suitable cause both of their being (bearing in mind the remark at 96a10) and of their becoming. The crucial element which Socrates wishes to highlight, in this respect, is that whereas sensible causes are fully adequate to explain sensible effects, when the effect is of an intelligible sort, the cause too must be intelligible. In other words, while the fact that Tom eats much more than Dick is perfectly sufficient to account for the differences that my sense organs experience when entering in contact with these two human beings' body masses, this explanation is no longer enough when it is a matter of explaining why, in seeing Tom and Dick, I also 'perceive' the largeness of the former and the smallness of the latter. According to Socrates, the cause of this largeness cannot be anything physical, but must rather be an intelligible form specific to the 'object' perceived. For otherwise we could not explain the existence of this largeness *qua* largeness, and would be forced to say that it has no cause (i.e. that it is caused by nothing).

The matter becomes even clearer if we move on from examples (1) and (2) to examples (4) and (5) (i.e. from being to becoming). The problem of understanding why opposite operations like uniting and dividing can produce exactly the same effect (duplication) is purely accessory here. The real problem lies elsewhere, and Socrates clearly presents it at lines 97a1–5:

> For I find it astonishing that when each of them was apart from the other, each turned out to be one, and they weren't two at that time, but when they came near each other, this supposedly became a cause of their coming to be two, namely the union that consisted in being put near each other.

18 According to Stough, Socrates rejects physical explanations because he erroneously believes that when a man becomes large, what happens is that smallness becomes largeness. According to the same scholar, this fallacy stems from the incorrect assimilation of the attribute (largeness) to that of which the attribute is an attribute, in the sense that to state "Simmias is large" is equivalent to saying that the component of largeness exists in Simmias (Stough 1976, p. 12). But this explanation assumes what instead ought to be clarified. That 'things' like largeness are merely attributes of physical subjects is precisely what Plato seeks to deny. And we can confirm that this is no philosophical naivety by comparing the Platonic thesis, for instance, to the notions of *eidos* and 'eidetic intuition' in Husserlian phenomenology.

The cause of bewilderment and wonder for Socrates, then, is the fact that the union of two single things has produced something like 'being two', which previously was not there, and that the cause of this 'being two' is supposed to lie in operations, such as addition or juxtaposition, which are irrelevant for the effect of 'being two'. If we then wish to be sure of the fact that addition and juxtaposition are irrelevant in this regard, we only need to note that the very same effect (namely the appearance of duality) can also be achieved through the opposite action, namely division (this is where the accessory observation about opposites comes into play). What Plato aims to note, therefore, is not that every phenomenon can only have one cause (as Ebrey 2014 claims in relation to a purely physical context). What matters in the argument is not the fact that there might be more than one cause, but rather the fact – evidenced by the examples provided – that these causes stand in opposition to one another. Indeed, according to both the common mode of arguing and the method of scientific enquiry, the sufficient condition to deny that a given effect is generated by a given cause is to show that there is nothing specific to such a cause that determines it as the appropriate cause of that effect: in other words, one must show not merely that the effect in question can be produced by a different cause (which would be acceptable in itself), but that the effect can even be produced by a cause operating in the opposite way from it. For example, imagine a chemist who has a base react to a certain compound and observes a change of colour in it. If the same chemist were to repeat the experiment by replacing the base with an acid, and were to notice that the effect produced is the same, he would almost certainly conclude that the cause of this effect is neither the nature of the base nor that of the acid.

Therefore, there is something real which appears and disappears in conjunction with generation and corruption, but which physical-mechanical causes cannot account for. If we unite two previously separate things (or divide two previously united things), from a physical perspective, the quantity of being has remained exactly the same: nothing has come into being (from nothing) and nothing has perished (into nothingness). But from an ontological perspective, the matter is very different. Now something that previously was not there, namely the form or quality "two", has appeared – seemingly out of nothing.

This also explains Socrates' sixth example: where (as previously remarked) "the principle that opposites cannot cause opposites" (Sedley) is not at play:

> I can no longer persuade myself that by using this approach I know why one comes to be, nor, in short, why anything else comes to be, or perishes, or is. (97b)

This actually appears to be the most decisive case. The case here at issue – which not by chance is the last and is intended to summarise the argument – shows that

Socrates' dissatisfaction has nothing or little to do with the opposite nature of the causes, the effects or both. What is relevant here is only the problems raised by the facts of corruption, generation and being in themselves. Where does the difficulty lie in understanding how two things become one? Is it not enough to unite them? But this is not the real difficulty at all: the real difficulty lies in understanding in what way union has produced the 'form/quality' of unity. The problem, in other words, is to understand how it is possible that what is 'not one/one' becomes 'one/non-one', and more in general how a 'x' or 'non-x' becomes 'non-x' or 'x'. If, as Socrates argues, physical-mechanical causes cannot be adequate explanations for events of this sort, then we must necessarily find another kind of cause, one suited to them: for otherwise it would mean that the effect in question (becoming 'one' or 'x') is engendered by nothing.

5 The Eleatic Background

The theoretical context within which the investigation about the causes of generation and corruption takes place is neither physical nor logical, then, but rather ontological – in the specific sense associated with Parmenidean ontology and its effects on the development of Greek philosophy up to Plato. According to the rules set by the Eleatic thinkers, from Parmenides to Melissus, no transition can ever occur from being to nothingness or, conversely, from nothingness to being. Holding fast to this rule, how can we explain becoming? The solution suggested by what textbooks usually refer to as 'pluralist' Pre-Socratics philosophy consists in making the quantity of matter fixed from eternity and throughout eternity, and in explaining becoming (and in particular processes of generation and corruption) by invoking different forms of aggregation of such matter. This would appear to save the Eleatic principles.[19] Plato's thesis is that this solution would only work if the whole of reality were made up of material substances and if, therefore, all knowledge were sensible in nature. Instead, we may note that within reality there exist immaterial forms that are an object of specific – which is to say, intellectual – knowledge for human subjects. But this means that processes of becoming are marked not merely by the aggregation and disintegration of qualitatively identical matter, but also by the seemingly sudden appearance and disappearance of immaterial and

19 Cf., for instance Empedocles 31 B8 (D48 Laks-Most, from whose translation we quote): "Something else I will tell you: of nothing is / there birth, among all / Mortal things, nor is there an ending coming / from baleful death, / But only mixture and exchange of things mixed/ Exist, and 'birth' is a name given by mortal / humans". See also 31 B11–12. For Anaxagoras see 59 B12 and for Democritus 67 A18.

intelligible entities such as the 'forms'. Thus, for instance, while it is true that a young person will grow old, that a fruit will become ripe, and that water will turn to ice without even the tiniest fragment of matter passing from being into nothingness or vice-versa, for all such processes we can indeed find some real objects that seem to undergo precisely this kind of ontologically impossible transformation: the previously existent form 'young' at one point vanishes into nothing, whereas the previously non-existent form 'old' appears out of nothing – and the same applies to unripeness and ripeness (in the case of a fruit), liquid and solid (in the case of water), and so on. But if these forms are all real objects, as they undoubtedly are for Plato,[20] then the Eleatic principles require the existence of non-physical causes, such as the Forms.

If all this is plausible, we can also understand why, in discussing Pre-Socratic theories about generation and corruption, Plato distinguishes Anaxagoras' position from that of other naturalist philosophers, and only takes him into consideration in a separate way.[21] As we have seen, Socrates' dissatisfaction at the Pre-Socratics initially concerns their failure to realise that processes of aggregation and disintegration – to which Socrates chiefly alludes through examples 4 and 5 – cannot explain the appearance and disappearance of Forms. But can this approach also be extended to Anaxagoras? There are good reasons to answer this in the negative. According to one plausible reconstruction of his thought, he affirmed the eternity and incorruptibility of all those properties that appear and disappear in processes of becoming. How is it possible – Anaxagoras asks himself in a well-known fragment (B 19) – that from what is neither flesh nor hair (the reference being to processes of nutrition and assimilation) substances of this kind come into being? The only solution allowed by the Parmenidean rules is that the seeds of flesh and hair are already to be found in

20 Cf. n. 17.

21 Not all scholars agree on this point. "Now it is not new (the reference here is to Furley 1976) that Plato, throughout the whole reply to Cebes (say 97a6–107a1), is setting out his position in contrast with Anaxagoras, not just on the issue for which Anaxagoras is explicitly cited, on nous and teleological explanation, but also on the causes of predication and change, being-F and coming-to-b-F" (Menn 2010, p. 48; see also Ebrey 2014, p. 250, who apparently detects no break between the section devoted to Anaxagoras and the one devoted to the *physiologoi*). However, this hypothesis seems to me to be incompatible with the way in which Anaxagoras is introduced in the text, where Plato makes the implicit assumption that he is presenting something different and new compared to what has already been argued: "However, one day I heard somebody reading from what he said was a book by Anaxagoras…" (97a). Otherwise, we would have to conclude that, if Anaxagoras had correctly understood the *nous*, according to Plato the problem of predication and of generation and corruption could also be solved without resorting to the Ideas. But I believe we can safely rule out this possibility.

the compounds formed by the foodstuff, albeit to a minor degree, and become perceptible through the quantitative changes engendered by the dynamics of nutrition and assimilation.[22] Of course, even assuming that the reconstruction just presented is correct, Anaxagoras' seeds are far from the level of abstraction characterising the Platonic Forms, such as unity, duality, largeness, and so on. It is true, however, that, unlike other Pre-Socratics, Anaxagoras cannot be accused of having violated the Eleatic rule according to which there cannot be any transition from being to nothingness, and vice-versa. Menn insightfully notes that

> both Anaxagoras ad Plato think that, at least for some range of predicates F, an ordinary sensible thing S which is F by participating in the F, where 'the F' here is not another participant, but something which is purely and essentially and eternally F. (p. 48)

But it is precisely this formula that, from Plato's perspective, allows us to solve the 'Eleatic' problem formulated by Zeno in the *Parmenides* (a given thing can simultaneously be similar and different, insofar as it simultaneously partakes of the Forms of sameness and difference) and which is taken up by Socrates in the *Phaedo* (a given thing can become large from small without any contradiction, because it ceases to partake of the Form of smallness and begins to partake of the Form of largeness). It is true that Anaxagoras probably did not extend this principle to all predicates in which Plato was interested, and that what is "purely and essentially and eternally F" according to Anaxagoras does not have the characteristics that Plato deems necessary in order for it to be such. However, it is equally true that this is the correct solution for Plato from a formal point of view. This last point is enough to explain why, in the *Phaedo* passage under scrutiny here, Plato discusses the *physiologoi* and Anaxagoras in two different sections: while not even Anaxagoras' theory can solve all the problems raised in this passage, it fails to do so for reasons other than the shortcomings that Plato attributes to the *physiologoi*, and which do not apply to Anaxagoras. Certainly, when introducing this philosopher, Plato could have observed that although – unlike the *physiologoi* – he had grasped the need to posit a changeless and eternal nature, he had conceived of this nature in such a way as to make it impossible to solve the problem. However, Plato makes no such observation and instead chooses to focus on the *nous* and the problem of teleology. Why? I would suggest that this choice is due to Plato's intention to show the distance between what Anaxagoras seems to promise, namely the

22 See Vlastos 1969, p. 310, n. 50; Centrone 2000, p. 220, n. 29.

overcoming of the materialist position, and what he actually maintains. And in order to test exactly to what extent Anaxagoras falls short of his promise, the most revealing case to consider is precisely that of the *nous*.

Anaxagoras can be reproached because adherence to Parmenides' rules ought to have led him to acknowledge, first of all, the existence of immaterial entities within the sensible universe itself, and then also the fact that such entities – insofar as they too must respect Parmenides' prohibitions – necessarily imply the existence of an intelligible dimension separate from the sensible one. In this regard, it might have been useful to introduce a principle such as the intellect alongside the seeds, provided of course that this was conceived as being separate and immaterial. But in point of fact Anaxagoras does not appear to have ever reached this level. For while it is true that in his view the *nous* is "independent and not mixed with anything, but is alone itself by itself", it is equally true that this *nous* is described as "the thinnest of all things and the purest" (B 12). Hence Socrates' disappointment, documented by our *Phaedo* passage: although Anaxagoras has on hand a kind of cause separate from sensible causes, and thus potentially different from them from a qualitative perspective, he does not resort to it, but continues to explain generation and corruption by using physical-material entities as causes (98b9–c1).

In the *Phaedo* passage about Anaxagoras Socrates draws attention to this shortcoming by chiefly relying on the fact that if a principle such as the intellect is removed from the physical-mechanical dimension, it ought to function as a final cause. This circumstance has caused scholars considerable trouble: for if the general thesis that Plato wishes to uphold here is that the Pre-Socratics have failed to grasp that the true cause of the being and becoming of things can only be a Form, then on the one hand the requirement that the sought-for cause have a finalistic character is only introduced in relation to Anaxagoras, while on the other hand it is unclear whether – and in what way – a Form can be regarded as a final cause. Hence, some scholars have somehow sought to prove that the Forms are final causes, while others have denied that this is the case.[23] I tend to favour this latter option, and I also believe that the problem in question is not solved, or even addressed, in the *Phaedo*. Indeed, a final cause cannot be merely intelligible, but must also be intelligent: such ought to have been (but according to Plato is not) Anaxagoras' *nous*; and such will instead be the cause of mixture in the *Philebus* and the demiurgic intellect in the *Timaeus*.[24]

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23 Vlastos, for example, denies this on the basis of 99c6–d2, where Socrates states that he has been unable to find the final causes: Vlastos 1969, p. 302.

24 See Vlastos 1969, p. 303: as both the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus* explain, the teleological function exclusively pertains to the intellect or soul. Likewise, according to Annas, the

As far as the *Phaedo* is concerned, Plato merely notes that the potential advantages of Anaxagoras' view have not led him to the correct solution, because – among other things – a complete causal explanation must also take the end into account. But Plato is not interested in exploring this issue in the passage under scrutiny, because it is irrelevant to the purpose of his argument (namely, to show that the soul is incorruptible). What is instead relevant to this purpose is to show that becoming cannot be explained if not by positing the existence of a formal cause (to use Aristotelian terminology) separate from the sensible realm, and responsible for the appearance and disappearance of abstract properties within it. Aristotle's terminology is not inappropriate here,[25] but has (I think) a clarifying impact, as in relation to the behaviour of form within the processes of coming to be and passing away Aristotle had exactly the same problem as Plato. The Aristotelian form, having neither matter nor potentiality, cannot suffer either corruption or generation. It must, therefore, be eternal and imperishable, exactly as Plato's Forms are. And Aristotle ought, of course, to prove that such qualifications do not necessarily depend, as Plato maintained, upon separation (this is the reproach that Neoplatonist philosophers, starting from Plotinus, often addressed to him).

Platonic Forms (including the Idea of goodness) are irrelevant in relation to the teleological problem, and it is only in the *Timaeus* (46c–47a; 68e–69d) that we find what is lacking the *Phaedo* (Annas 1982, p. 315; see also Sedley 1995 pp. 7–8). Conversely, while acknowledging that the teleological explanation does not appear to directly refer to the Forms, Taylor strives to find a way of showing that the final cause of Socrates' imprisonment must ultimately be found in the Forms themselves, and specifically in the Idea of goodness (Taylor 1969, pp. 46–47). Sedley's explanation shows some similarities with Taylor's: as the final cause is only the cause of good things, ultimately it must possible to trace it back to the Form of goodness; hence, it represents a particular application of the formal cause (Sedley 1998, pp. 126–127). However, against the notion that the Form of goodness mediates between the Form and the end, Vlastos' above-mentioned observation holds: the end can only be produced by an intelligent entity (such as the intellect or the soul), not by intelligible entities (such as the Ideas, including the very Idea of goodness).

25 *Contra*, see Sharma 2009, p, 142, n. 22. Sharma, besides, thinks that "formal causes" have nothing to do with the argument: "it would make little sense to describe Socrates as attempting to recommend one component (a formal one) of some larger causal theory by disclaiming any interest in another (an efficient one)" (p. 148); more in particular, Socrates could hardly be "so confused about what he is proposing as to entertain that formal explanations may be considered replacements for efficient ones" (pp. 149–149). Sharma could be right only if Plato, in this section of the *Phaedo*, were concerned with an exhaustive inquiry into the causes of generation and passing-away. But he is clearly not. He is only interested in showing the existence of Forms in order to prove the immortality of the soul, and thus he does not need to go further the unique cause (the "formal" one) relevant for his purpose.

6 Conclusion

I can therefore end my exposition as follows. Wishing to respond to Cebes' objection, Socrates states that it is necessary to discuss the problem of the cause of generation and corruption. Yet he has no intention to provide a complete and coherent doctrine on the matter. What he needs is simply a strong argument to bring his interlocutor to grant that the Forms exist, since it is precisely on this basis that he hopes to persuade Cebes that the soul is indestructible. To achieve this, he shows that events are to be found within becoming that cannot be explained by physical-material causes. Hence, assuming the principle that every event must have a cause suitable to its nature, it is necessary to posit the existence of entities such as immobile, intelligible, and immaterial Forms. The reference to the world of generation and corruption, then, does not at all imply that Plato is here attempting to develop a general theory of physical causality. Indeed, this reference has the sole purpose of establishing the hypothesis of the Forms on evidence that cannot be eluded. Not only, therefore, does Plato not dwell on an explanation of how the Forms might function as the causes of becoming, how they relate to the things caused, what heuristic value they may have, and so on; but it is even possible to show that when Plato sets himself the specific aim of investigating the causes of the physical universe (that is, in the *Timaeus*), he adopts a completely different procedure. In the light of all this, it seems to me that both the criticisms levelled against the ingenuity and vacuousness of the causal explanations identified in the *Phaedo*[26] (e.g., a thing is large because it participates in largeness) and the eager attempts made to show that this is a fruitful theory, or at any rate one somehow compatible with Plato's philosophical stature,[27] miss the mark.

As far as the charge of 'ingenuity', is concerned, it is worth noting the Plato himself was perfectly aware of it. Let us read what Socrates says to Cebes at the end of the argument sketched out above:

> Suppose someone tells me why some thing or other is beautiful, and says that it is because it has a vivid colour or shape, or some other such thing. I ignore those other explanations, because I am confused when they are

26 See, for example, what Annas writes: "We find, then, that Plato finds fault with one kind of explanation, praises another and offers a third" (Annas 1982, p. 318). In other words, Plato finds physical explanations inadequate, demands a teleological explanation, and then proposes a third that is neither physical nor teleological. Once again, all this would only seem odd if in this text Plato were aiming to explain the causes of generation and corruption; but because his aim is to demonstrate that the Ideas exist, all oddness disappears.

27 As for example Vlastos and Sedley in the above-mentioned articles.

> all around me, and I keep the following at my side, in my straightforward, amateurish and perhaps simple-minded way: nothing makes it beautiful other than that beautiful's presence, or association, or whatever its mode and means of accruing may be. (100c–d)

Socrates does not ignore the fact that the reply he recommends to the question about "the [real] causes of each thing, why each one comes to be, why it perishes, and why it is" (96a9–10), can appear simple-minded or ingenuous. He thinks, however, that

> it is safest to give this reply both to [himself] and to another, and [he] believe that if [he] cling to this [he] could never fall, but that it is safe to reply both to [himself] and to anyone else that it is because of the beautiful that beautiful things come to be beautiful. (100d–e)

To integrate his reasoning, we might say that Socrates reply is simple-minded if it is understood as a scientific explanation of physical phenomena. It is the safest (ἀσπαλέστατον) answer, instead, if the enquiry moves from the physical to the metaphysical level. In this case, what Plato is pointing out in this section of the *Phaedo* is an enduring philosophical problem, concerning the difficulty of confining the explanations of physical phenomena within the boundaries of merely material constituents (a problem faced by philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Leibniz, Hegel, Bergson and beyond – not excluding contemporary theoretical physics).[28]

28 Hankinson's 1998 (p. 88) treatment of this topics has the merit of correctly identifying the metaphysical (and not physical) nature of the causal explanation here put forward by Socrates. While, on the one hand, Plato's project could be deemed entirely "vacuous" (Hankinson brings "Molière's" explanations into play), on the other hand "it can be rescued from such vacuity by treating the Form of Beauty as a genuine object, one which is in some sense responsible for the inherence of the property in its instances; and that is exactly Plato's view of his Forms". Hankinson then continues: "Yet that is hardly liable to commend itself to anyone not already enamoured of Platonic metaphysics". But since what Socrates is doing here is clearly the opposite (namely, arguing through the analysis of perceptual experience for the existence of such metaphysical objects as the Platonic Forms, and not presupposing them from scratch), this amounts simply to saying that Plato's metaphysical views – let us bear Barnes' remarks in mind here – are of no philosophical interest at all.

CHAPTER 8

Voyage(s)

1 The Deuteros Plous

The *Phaedo* passage in which Socrates states that he had to undertake a "second voyage' (*deuteros plous*, 99c–d) has been made the object of detailed scrutiny over the centuries, giving rise to highly divergent interpretations owing to the difficulty of determining the exact meaning of the metaphor and the general complexity of the argument, which does not seem to unfold in a wholly linear fashion. In order to understand what Plato means by this metaphor, it is necessary to identify the exact position and function of the passage within the broader section of the dialogue in which it occurs. The context for the metaphor is Socrates' response to what is known as Cebes' objection (86e–88b), which through a long and winding route will lead to the final and most demanding demonstration of the immortality of the soul. Cebes had objected to Socrates that even if we grant that the soul is capable of surviving death (which would make it "immortal"), understood as the separation of body and soul, we still have to prove that the soul as such cannot perish or be destroyed, independently of its relationship with the body. In other words, until we have shown that the soul is immortal (ἀθάνατος) in the sense that it is indestructible (ἀνώλεθρος), we haven't really proven anything at all.

The radical, and in a way crucial, character of Cebes' objection explains the circuitous route that Socrates is forced to take in order to come up with a solution. Socrates first of all remarks that in order to address the problem raised by Cebes, it is necessary to investigate the causes of the coming into being and perishing of things (95a) and of their very being (96a). It is easy to see why this kind of investigation must be undertaken as a preliminary step – preliminary, that is, to the demonstration of the fact that the soul is indeed indestructible. Cebes' objection brings up the problem of whether there exists anything eternal and imperishable in nature, or whether everything that exists is inexorably subject to a cyclical process of generation and corruption. I have already dealt with the developments of these premises in the previous chapter, so in the present one I will limit myself to summarising the conclusions:

1. in order to be truly satisfactory, the search for the causes of generation and corruption requires that such causes be other than mechanical/material ones;

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2. the enquiry made by the philosophers of *physis* are unsatisfactory, because they only bring mechanical/material causes into play;
3. even Anaxagoras, who by introducing the *nous* seemed to have opened up the investigation to the search for the non-mechanical/material, ultimately failed to find the immaterial causes required.

Let us suppose now that the second voyage is to be interpreted in generically metaphysical terms, an interpretation made popular in Italy (and beyond) by the late Giovanni Reale:[1] the second voyage would mark a radical shift of perspective, which leaves behind the one-dimensional world of pre-Socratic philosophy, acknowledging the necessary existence of a higher, immaterial dimension with characteristics of its own (insofar as it is non-sensible, eternal, incorruptible, etc.). In other words, the second voyage would represent the first step in the millennial history of Western metaphysics. And if this is how things stand, the first voyage can only be interpreted as a research horizon that limits its object to what is material, sensible, changing, perishable, etc.

But if this were the case, it would mean that the second voyage already took place, in a way, when Socrates affirmed the inadequacy of the mechanical/material method adopted by the philosophers of *physis*. Alternatively, we might conclude that the second voyage consists precisely in the overcoming of pre-Socratic materialism through the 'Platonic' doctrine of Forms. But this openly conflicts with the letter of the text, which describes the second voyage as a "flight into *logoi*" (99e5: εἰς τοὺς λόγους καταφυφόντα), and obviously *logoi* cannot be identified with Forms. Rather, *logos* here means a 'discourse unfolding in the form of an argument'; and if it is plausible that these reasoned discourses primarily coincide with those leading precisely to the positing of the Forms (according to the sense in which Aristotle uses *logos* in *Metaph.* A 9), the second voyage always concerns discourses, not Forms.

Then there is an arguably even more serious difficulty, which concerns the very meaning of the metaphor. There is no doubt that the metaphor is set within the context of a transition from sensible causes to purely intelligible ones. But the hypothesis that by this metaphor Plato sought to describe the transition in question in a specific and direct way leads to quite a few problems. Indeed, 'second voyage' is a proverbial expression that indicates a fall-back choice – which is to say, in principle, a worse choice than the first voyage (whatever this may be): a sort of second best, given that the first choice, however much better it may be, is unfortunately no option at all. It is hardly surprising, therefore,

1 Cf. Reale, 1997, pp. 137–58.

that the aforementioned champions of the 'metaphysical' interpretation have tried to come up with arguments to show that the second voyage constitutes an improvement, not a worsening, of the first.[2] The main argument invokes the *scholia* to the Platonic text, which offer a consistent interpretation for all three passages featuring the metaphor in question (in addition to the *Phaedo*, *Philebus* 19c, and *Statesman* 300c; we will return to theses passages later): the second voyage would be 'safer' compared to the first voyage, which has proven infeasible.[3]

However, as Stefano Martinelli Tempesta has persuasively shown in a study published in 2003[4] (which has regrettably been largely ignored by scholars), this interpretation is untenable. The article in question can safely be said to have established the three following points:

a. All occurrences of the *iunctura* δεύτερος πλοῦς in ancient literature (79 on the whole) – down to the very few who might seem controversial only at a superficial reading – indicate that it has a pejorative meaning.
b. The other two occurrences in Plato, in addition to those present in the *Phaedo*, unequivocally suggest that the formula 'second voyage' expresses a worsening, if only in the sense of a second best.
c. The interpretation proposed in the scholia was in all likelihood developed in order to oppose a possible scepticising interpretation of Plato's philosophy. It is most likely that it was first put forward in relation to the *Phaedo* passage, where a pejorative reading of the expression would indeed mean that the research method which the philosopher must follow is in any case destined to remain approximate and incomplete (i.e. a second best). The scholiast would then have been forced, for the sake of consistency, to confirm the same interpretation also in relation to the other Platonic passages, even though in these two other cases it is difficult to dispute the pejorative reading.
d. Finally, equally untenable is a possible mixed interpretation such as the one according to which the second voyage is, on the one hand, a worsening (since it is more toilsome) but, on the other hand, an improvement, since it is safer. Because this is a proverb, and not a metaphor (or analogy), the meaning of the phrase cannot be uncertain or ambiguous.

However, if this is the true meaning of the metaphor, it follows that a serious problem emerges for our understanding of the text. Certainly, in his response to Cebes, Socrates highlights the need to resort to causes superior to the

2 Cf. e.g. Kanayama 2000 and Pakaluk 2003.
3 See e.g. Gallop 1975, p. 176; Frede 1999, p. 121.
4 Martinelli Tempesta 2003.

physical ones. But how can this be consistent with the meaning of the metaphor, according to which Socrates' enquiry finally results in a 'second voyage', that is a second method which must be somewhat worse than the first one? How could it be 'Platonic' to say that searching for causes superior to physical reality is, in any way, a second best?[5] We get closer to a solution if we consider that there is no need to believe that the bad turn implied by the metaphor concerns the causes themselves. As anticipated, the content of the second voyage is the act of finding refuge in *logoi* (99e, εἰς τοὺς λόγους καταφυγόντα). And since – as already noted – *logoi* are not Forms, the possibility remains that by the expression "to take refuge in *logoi*" Socrates is referring to the method, not the content, and pointing to an asymmetry: while the Forms constitute a far more solid foundation for knowledge than sensible reality, they may not be as easily accessible as knowledge of material realities; and if this were the case, then the metaphor of the second voyage would be absolutely appropriate.[6]

2 What Is the "First Voyage?"

If the second voyage is "to take refuge in *logoi*", what does the first voyage stand for?

One very common idea is that it coincides with the search for final causes. Since it has the advantage of respecting the clause according to which the first voyage must be somehow better than the second, it is not surprising that this is by far the most popular interpretation among scholars. The crucial passage to settle the matter is 99c5–9:

5 Drawing upon the widespread idea that the second voyage is a passage from physical to logical-dialectical causes, some scholars have deemed it possible to justify the worsening entailed in the metaphor by invoking the less scientific nature of the new explanation suggested. See, for instance, Delcomminette 2006. An explanation of the kind 'the cause why a thing is beautiful is its participation in the form of beauty' "n'est décevant que dans une perspective physique: de fait, il ne nous apprend proprement rien sur la manière dont une chose devient ceci ou cela" (pp. 573–734). But since, after all, the causes introduced with the second voyage are the Forms, this hypothesis would only work if Plato believed that explanations such as those provided by the participation in Forms were dialectical (*logikoteroi*) in the same lessening sense that Aristotle endorses in some anti-Platonic passages of his work (cf. Vegetti 1993, Burnyeat 2001, pp. 19–25, Trabattoni 2003 a, pp. 286–89). But of course this is not the case.

6 Cf. Tait 1986: there is no way to read the text as if "the theory of Forms" [understood as "S is f in virtue of its participation in the Form F] were "an example of the second best method" p. (456).

> Now I would gladly become anyone's pupil to learn just what the truth is about that sort of cause. But since I was denied it and haven't been able either to find it myself or to learn it from someone else, would you like me to give you a demonstration, Cebes, of how I've pursued my second voyage (*deuteros plous*) in search of the cause?[7]

According to Vlastos 1969 and many other authors,[8] the object of the two infinitives *heurein* (to find) and *mathein* (to learn) is the *tautes* (this) at line c8, which refers to the final cause. Hence, Socrates would be arguing that he has adopted the second voyage precisely because he is incapable of finding the final cause.

However, this solution does not fit the conditions required by the argument. As we have seen, to answer Cebes' question Socrates needs to prove that Forms exist. But the Forms (as argued in the previous chapter) are not final causes. Therefore, if the first voyage were the discovery of the final causes, we would have to conclude that the best method would not achieve any relevant result in relation to the problem at issue: not only is there no evident relationship between final causes and the immortality of the soul, but in the course of the argument the Forms are called into question, to use Aristotelian terminology, as formal, and not final, causes.[9]

Thus, it seems necessary to find an alternative explanation. In my opinion, the correct path has been taken by Ross 1982. In his view, the use of the verbs *heurein* and *mathein* directly recalls the programme enunciated by Simmias at 85c7–8:

> Because concerning them one ought surely to achieve one of the following: either to learn or discover how things are, or, if it is impossible to do that, at least to take the best human proposition – the hardest one to disprove etc.[10]

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7 ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν τῆς τοιαύτης αἰτίας ὅπῃ ποτὲ ἔχει μαθητὴς ὁτουοῦν ἥδιστ᾽ ἂν γενοίμην· ἐπειδὴ δὲ ταύτης ἐστερήθην καὶ οὔτ᾽ αὐτὸς εὑρεῖν οὔτε παρ᾽ ἄλλου μαθεῖν οἷός τε ἐγενόμην, τὸν δεύτερον πλοῦν ἐπὶ τὴν τῆς αἰτίας ζήτησιν ᾗ πεπραγμάτευμαι βούλει σοι, ἔφη, ἐπίδειξιν ποιήσωμαι, ὦ Κέβης.

8 Among others Hackforth 1955, Rose 1966, Taylor 1969, Gallop 1975, Annas 1982, Wiggins 1986, Tait 1986, Sedley 1998, Gonzalez 1998, Fine 2003. For an overview of the most common opinions see Shipton 1979, p. 33 and n. 1; Ross 1982, p. 23, n. 6.

9 For the use of Aristotelian terminology see Sharma 2009, p. 147, n. 22. Cf. ch. 7, pp. 139 and n. 25.

10 δεῖν γὰρ περὶ αὐτὰ ἕν γέ τι τούτων διαπράξασθαι, ἢ μαθεῖν ὅπῃ ἔχει ἢ εὑρεῖν ἤ, εἰ ταῦτα ἀδύνατον, τὸν γοῦν βέλτιστον τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων λόγων λαβόντα καὶ δυσεξελεγκτότατον κτλ.

The 'first voyage' would be Socrates' attempt to apply the programme laid out by Simmias in the passage just quoted: Socrates has searched for the causes of generation and corruption by attempting first to find them on his own, in the physical realm, and then to learn them from another person, namely Anaxagoras.[11] But Socrates has failed on both counts. The disappointment with regard to the final cause proves precisely the lack of success of the second attempt, which – combined with the first failure – persuades him to change his method: the second voyage is thus an alternative not to the search for final causes, but to the two types of approach marked by the two infinitives.

This explanation, however, is only half-convincing. I agree that the second voyage amounts to the forgoing not of the search for final causes,[12] but of the double method based on searching for causes now by *heurein*, now by *mathein*. If this is true, though, it is practically certain that *heurein* and *mathein* must have a common shortcoming from which Socrates distances himself through the second voyage. But if – as Ross suggests – *heurein* is Socrates' attempt to proceed on his own by searching for the cause in the physical world, whereas *mathein* is the attempt to learn from another person, then no common element is to be found. Moreover, it is rather problematic to maintain that, for Socrates, to go it alone means searching for the causes in the physical world: for if the second voyage must somehow be a second best compared to the first, this condition is met by engagement with the final causes, not the physical causes (in relation to which enquiry through *logoi* cannot in any way be regarded as a second best). For both these reasons, the more plausible hypothesis would still appear to be Vlastos', according to which the second voyage only rejects the search for final causes.

To solve the problem, I believe it is necessary, in both 85c7–8 and 99d8–9, to set aside the idea that *heurein* means finding things out *on one's own* and *mathein* learning *from someone else*. In itself, the verb *heurein* simply means "to find", which is to say to come across something that is accessible to knowledge in itself (although it may be located in a place unknown to us, or indeed in a known yet hidden place – as in the case of a porcini mushroom shrouded in moss, in an impenetrable area of a forest). In turn, *mathein* indicates the help provided by someone who tells us where to look. In the light of this, it is easy to identify what links the two methods: both rest on the hypothesis that the thing sought for is directly visible, and hence that it is possible to find it simply by

11 According to Shipton 1979, which partly anticipates Ross 1982's perspective, "learning from others" would refer instead to the "divine logos" mentioned in *Phaedo* 85d.

12 Against the idea that the second voyage must be read as "if Socrates is still concerned with final causes", see Sharma 2009, pp. 142–143.

knowing where to look – either because we have figured it out on our own or because someone has taught us.

If this is how things stand, then the articulation between the first and the second voyage becomes clear. Once we have established that the true causes of generation cannot be grasped with the senses, how can we set out to discover them? Socrates states that he has failed to find them either on his own or with the help of anyone else, i.e. by having this person teach him where the sought-for object lies and where he must look to find it (as one might do – to carry our example further – when hunting for mushrooms). For Socrates this two-fold disappointment bears witness to the fact that the correct method to track down the sought-for object is not *heurein*, understood precisely as the finding of something that exists, something which is there, and which can be grasped by correctly directing one's gaze[13] (let us think of the mushroom example again). Particularly revealing, in this respect, is the second metaphor featured in the passage in question, that of an eclipse (99d–e). Socrates explains that the method of the second voyage he has adopted is analogous to that used by people wishing to gaze at the sun during an eclipse: in order not to be blinded, they must gaze at the sun in a reflected and indirect manner (for instance, by looking at it in water). This second metaphor shows even more clearly than the first that the sought-for cause is not an object which can be grasped by the human faculties in an immediate and direct way, since it is something that can only be approached through an indirect, second-best method, which is to say – all metaphors aside – through the filter of *logoi*. To put it in even more clear-cut terms, what this means is that, while there exist human faculties capable of grasping material objects directly, namely the senses, there is no faculty capable of grasping non-material objects directly.

3 Images

We should not be troubled by the fact that in the aforementioned passage Socrates himself questions the pertinence of the metaphors he employs, by stating that we cannot admit that knowing reality through *logoi* is a mode of knowing based on images more than knowing reality through facts is. Of course, what Socrates means by "facts" here (ἔργοις, 100a2) is sensible reality; hence, his reasoning must be interpreted as follows. The text implies that there are different degrees of "inspecting through images" (this is the meaning of ἐν εἰκόσι μᾶλλον

13 In agreement with the no doubt reductive image of Platonic epistemology popularised by Martin Heidegger.

σκοπεῖν, 100a2), so that the image of true reality afforded by *logos* is superior to that afforded by sensible objects. In other words, those who merely observe sensible reality have a direct knowledge 'superior', in terms of its method ('first voyage'), to that of people who seek to know the Forms, and must therefore make do with the indirect method offered by *logoi* ('second voyage'). However, sensible things too are images (or imitations) of the Forms, but they are far less reliable than *logoi*. It follows, then, that sensible knowledge is in no way a better knowledge than intellectual knowledge, since it is only methodologically superior when it has the irrelevant sensible reality as its object (insofar as in this case it represents a direct form of knowledge, as opposed to one based on images). But when it is used to know intelligible reality, it is methodologically inferior to the use of *logoi*, since sensible things are 'images' of true reality to a greater degree than *logoi*; and because being 'an image of' implies to 'being different from', sensible objects, as 'more *images* than logoi are', are 'more *different*' from the true reality they intend to grasp – and thus are less reliable instruments of knowledge than *logoi*.[14] But this does not mean that *logoi*, though by far more reliable than sensible knowledge, are conclusive, inasmuch they are *images* as well, and therefore are different from/not identical to the true reality.[15]

What has just been said is confirmed in the metaphor of the divided line that we find at the end of Book VI of the *Republic*.[16] One of the elements pointed out by Socrates to identify the difference between the methods described in the two highest segments of the line (which later in the text will be defined, respectively, as *dianoia* and *noesis*) is that while the first method makes use of images, the second one "makes no use of the images employed by the other section, relying on ideas only and progressing systematically through ideas" (510b7–8, tr. Shorey). A few lines later Socrates specifies that this method makes "no use whatever of any object of sense but only of pure ideas moving on through ideas to ideas and ending with ideas" (510c1–2). That *dianoia* makes use of images taken from the objects of sense is implied in the example Socrates provides, namely that of the experts in geometry, who "make use of the visible forms and talk about them" (510c5–6). This example further clarifies what Socrates had already said when first introducing the notion of 'image'. Plato had explained that these images are "the things imitated in the former

14 Cf. *Soph*. 240a–b.

15 Cf. Dorter 1982 p. 123; Gonzalez 1990, p. 194. Kanayama 2009 (p. 47) asks too much of this passage: the fact that *logoi* are 'image' in a lesser way (and thus closer to the real truth) than physical objects does not at all mean that logoi are completely transparent (as he believes).

16 For a wider treatment of this topic, see Trabattoni 2016, chs. 8 and 9.

division" (510b4–5), which are evidently the objects of perception imitated by *eikasia* in the lower part of the line. By assuming that *noesis*, unlike *dianoia*, deals only with Forms, Socrates therefore wants to rule out both any reference to sense-perception and any reference to a true kind of 'vision', understood according the etymological root of the word 'idea'. Indeed, Socrates specifies that the subjects of *noesis* are *logos* and its faculty of 'discussing dialectically' (δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι, 551b3: an expression for which it is prudent to avoid an overly-specific translation such as "power of dialectic", and to prefer the more neutral formula "ability to discuss").

In sum, the difference between *dianoia* and *noesis* is this: on the side of the former we have the use of images taken from sense-perceptible objects (as in the case of those who use an orange to describe a sphere), on the side of the latter we have a totally aniconic enquiry, carried out exclusively through logos and *dialegesthai* (that is, discursive thought). That objects of sense-perception are images or copies/imitations of Forms is obviously sound Platonic doctrine (which, among other texts, is expressly stated in Book X of the *Republic*). The metaphor of the divided line shows that any attempt to know the Forms through these images fails to meet goal, as it does not succeed in reaching the level of intelligible reality, but on the contrary ends up falling back into the physical world, precisely because the images used there are taken from the lower section of the line. Nor could it be otherwise, because if the images of Forms are expected to be a kind of 'figure' (such as the circle drawn on the sand), this figure can only be an object of sense-perception, since no Idea appears to the intellect in this way. Indeed, to know the Forms, we have nothing but *logos* and *dialegesthai*.

This does not mean, however, that through the metaphor of the line Plato wishes to suggest that there is a direct method for knowing the Forms, completely free from the need to use images. First, in the passage quoted above Socrates does not say that *noesis* makes no use of images at all, but only that it "makes no use of the images *employed by the other section*" (510b7–8: τῶν περὶ ἐκεῖνο εἰκόνων). Secondly, and most importantly, according to Plato it would be possible to do without images only if *noesis* were understood as direct insight, which is to say as a faculty sufficient to grasp the Forms without intermediaries. But *noesis*, as we have seen, is discursive thinking, fulfilled through *logos* and *dialegehstai*. And *logos*, as shown by many passages of the dialogues (particularly the *Cratylus*)[17] is an image and *mimesis* (imitation) of the objects to which it refers. Therefore, the passage from *dianoia* to noesis *does not* point to the transition from a kind of thought operating through images to one operating

17 See Trabattoni 2016, ch. 7.

without them; instead, it points to the transition from a kind of thought operating through perceptual images to one operating through not-perceptual images, i.e. those produced by *logos*.

In this way, albeit implicitly, the metaphor of the divided line presents the same asymmetry that we saw at work in the *deuteros plous*. Geometry experts, to refer to Socrates' paradigmatic example for the use of *dianoia*,

> are not thinking of them [the images] but of those things of which they are a likeness, pursuing their inquiry for the sake of the square as such and the diagonal as such, and not for the sake of the image of it which they draw. (510d5–8)

However, they fail because their attempt to know the Forms directly, as if they were the objects of some insight, always ends up throwing the enquiry back into the realm of sense-perception, exactly as happens with the *Phaedo*'s 'first voyage'.

4 The Logos "Hardest to Disprove"

Let's go back, then, to this dialogue, from which we started. The interpretation of the *deuteros plous* I have just suggested perfectly agrees with the programme enunciated by Simmias in the parallel passage 85c–d. Not only are the alternatives of *heurein* and *mathein* proposed and rejected here, as in 99c, but again the only remaining possibility is the use of *logos*, which is described with the same conscious cautiousness that informs the metaphor of the second voyage. First of all, this is a human, not divine, *logos* – just as philosophy itself is human, whereas *sophia* is the prerequisite of the gods (cf. *Lys*. 218a, *Symp*. 204a, *Phdr*. 278d). Secondly, this is not an infallible or irrefutable *logos*: simply, the *logos* which man can rely on is the "hardest to disprove" (δυσεξελεγκτότατον) among those he is capable of finding by his own means (since no divine revelation is available, as Simmias points out shortly afterwards) through his tireless research, overcoming the temptation of misology through the constant search for a better *logos*. Finally, this *logos* does not offer any absolute guarantee of truth, exactly as is the case with the indirect and unreflected *logos* towards which Socrates decides to flee through the second voyage. The above-quoted passage continues as follows:

> and to ride on that (sc. the *logos*) as if one were taking one's chances on a raft, and to sail through life in that way, unless one could get through the journey with more safety. (85d1–3)

It would be difficult to come up with a more appropriate metaphor to establish a link with the second voyage:[18] just as the *logos* is second-best, and hence fallible, compared to the evidence afforded by the direct vision of the truth, so a raft is an unsafe means of transport, remote from the certainty that could be afforded by a divine *logos*, which would be infallible by definition. Indeed, it seems to me that in this way Plato is trying to point out that certainty is something divine, whereas human beings can only resort to the approximate and fallible instrument of *logos*.

Everything, then, would appear to converge towards the same outcome. Philosophy's ambition to get to know the cause of the generation, corruption, and existence of things does not reflect human beings' arrogant aspiration to breach the limits of their own nature, but rather reflects what human beings truly seek to know in order to successfully complete the uncertain and dangerous journey of life: for the meaning of coming into being and perishing, and hence what we expect after death, are of crucial significance for the successful completion of the journey. The metaphor of the raft, even more so than that of the second voyage, clearly captures the rift between the serious and difficult problems man faces – such as explaining the causes of generation and corruption, and therefore uncovering the secret of life and death – and the dearth of means at his disposal. But, unfortunately, no other means are available to human beings, who must therefore do their best to use the limited means they have in the best possible way.

5 The Deuteros Plous in Philebus

As previously noted, the interpretation of the *deuteros plous* as a 'second best' is confirmed by the other two Platonic passages where this expression is present, which we must now briefly deal with. Let us start with the *Philebus*. To solve the problem from which the dialogue began, that is, to establish whether the good life consists in pleasure (as suggested by Philebus, who however is soon replaced by Protarchus in the discussion) or knowledge (as maintained by Socrates), Socrates shifts the focus of the argument to the problem of the one and the many. He then describes a long and complex dialectical method, aimed at establishing, for each case taken into consideration, the exact proportion of unity and multiplicity:

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18 For Sedley's arguments against this analogy see ch. 9, p. 174, n. 21.

> This, then, is precisely the question which the previous discussion puts to us: How is each of them one and many, and how is it that they are not immediately infinite, but each possesses a definite number, before the individual phenomena become infinite? (18e8–9, tr. Fowler)

Protarchus acknowledges that this is a very difficult question. This impression is confirmed by what Socrates says a few lines below:

> You are quite right, son of Callias; for, as our previous discussion showed, unless we can do this in the case of every unity, every like, every same, and their opposites, none of us can ever be of any use in anything. (18b5–8)

This is a rather singular statement. On the one hand, the method proposed here by Socrates is extraordinarily long, so it seems to be impossible or very difficult to carry out. On the other hand, Socrates also seems to be saying that unless this procedure is fully accomplished, the enquiry will end in complete failure ("none of us can ever be of any use in anything"). These premises allows us to understand the meaning of Protarchus' reply, in which the *deuteros plous* is mentioned:

> That, Socrates, seems pretty likely to be true. However, it is splendid for the wise man to know everything, but the next best thing (*deuteros plous*), it seems, is not to be ignorant of himself. I will tell you why I say that at this moment. (19c1–3)

Let us postpone the analysis of this passage for a moment, and instead take a section of the *Parmenides* into consideration, where a very similar situation occurs. Parmenides has just finished expounding a dialectical method that is no less long and difficult than that presented by Socrates in the *Philebus*:

> In brief, whatever the subject of your hypothesis, if you suppose that it is or is not, or that it experiences any other affection, you must consider what happens to it and to any other particular things you may choose, and to a greater number and to all in the same way; and you must consider other things in relation to themselves and to anything else you may choose in any instance, whether you suppose that the subject of your hypothesis exists or does not exist, if you are to train yourself completely to see the truth perfectly. (136b6–c4, tr. Fowler)

The essentially unfeasible nature of this method is clearly revealed by the fact that here Parmenides does not content himself – as he will in the following

exercise – with dealing with what happens to the subject of investigation in relation to some "others" in general, but specifies that by "others" he means "any other particular things you may choose". Socrates' astonished reply is, therefore, anything but surprising:

> Parmenides, he said, "it is an unmanageable [as the Greek has ἀμήχανον, I reuse this adjective in place of Fowler's "stupendous"] amount of study which you propose, and I do not understand very well. (136c5–6)

Both in the *Philebus* and in the *Parmenides* the proponent of the method maintains, however, that the procedure suggested is unavoidable: in the former case, assuming that one wants to know something in general; in the latter case, assuming that one wants to know "the truth perfectly". But we can equate the two statements, by understanding the former in the sense of knowing something in a full and perfect way. Protarchus in the *Philebus* and Socrates in the *Parmenides*, therefore, are faced with an embarrassing dilemma. If they do not wish to admit that philosophy achieves no results at all, they should somehow try to practically apply the methods proposed (respectively by Socrates in the *Philebus* and by Parmenides in the dialogue named after him). But in this way it would be almost certain that no results will be achieved, since the methods in question are not really feasible.

It is precisely for this reason that the *deuteros plus* is brought into play here. The method advocated by Socrates in the *Philebus* is identified, in Protarchus' reply, with the claim to "know everything". And it is certainly no coincidence that he mentions the Delphic motto "know yourself", with the obvious meaning of "admit your limits". This motto, as is well known, was particularly dear to Socrates. It might seem that Protarchus wished to say something like: "Are you, Socrates – someone who, in accordance with the Delphic motto, and therefore with the essential limitation of the human condition it implies, deny that man has the possibility of knowing everything – now saying that this claim is a necessary property of philosophy?"

But, actually, it cannot be said that Socrates' position in *Philebus* is inconsistent. When Protarchus, a little earlier in the dialogue, remarks that the road proposed by Socrates is no "trifling matter" (16b), Socrates not only agrees, but also adds that such road, though he has always loved it, has often "deserted" him, leaving him "lonely and forlorn". And when Protarchus asks Socrates to say what this road is, he replies: it is "one which is easy to point out, but very difficult to follow". In this passage, therefore, we find not so much an opposition between Protarchus and Socrates, but rather a collaboration,

orchestrated by Plato,[19] which aims to point out to the reader an intermediate (and thus feasible) path for philosophical enquiry. It is hardly surprising, then, that Socrates actually accepts the procedure suggested by the metaphor of the *deuteros plous*: he ends up solving his problem, namely to establish the nature of the human good, without performing the immense dialectical exercise he had envisaged, but only through a rough and metaphorical definition of "goodness" (65a). Indeed, between the impossibility to know *everything* and the impossibility to know *anything* there is obviously a third way, namely the possibility of knowing *something*. This is, precisely, the *deuteros plous*.

What Plato wishes to suggest to the reader through the exchange of words between Socrates and Protarchus just summarised now becomes clear. There is no doubt that according to Plato there is an ideal model of philosophical knowledge, which in the *Philebus* coincides precisely with the infinite method that Protarchus understands as 'knowing everything'. We can call this method 'the first voyage'. Since, however, it is unfeasible, the philosopher must act, as always, as Socrates does here: he must firmly assert (as "it is easy to point out", 16c1) the existence of an ideal and perfect kind of knowledge, apart from which the perfect truth cannot be attained; but what he will actually do, since this main road is "very difficult to follow" (16c1), is take the intermediate feasible path that comes closest to it, and be content with the non-perfect yet perfectible 'truth' that can be obtained by this means.

6 The Deuteros Plous in *Statesman*

Let us move on now to the *Statesman*. In the second part of this dialogue, the Eleatic Stranger identifies the criterion for evaluating the validity of the three types of constitution (monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy) with the presence and observance of the laws. Six constitutions emerge in this way, three good and three bad. None of them, however, corresponds to the ideal model of a perfect state, that is, the only one that can really be called a *politeia*. In this constitution rulers are "truly wise" (293c6–7). And since their perfect wisdom guarantees the full well-being of all citizens (297a–b), in this case they will have the right to use force, just as doctors do, no matter the consent of the ruled, and without the constraint of having to establish written laws (293c). In such a situation the ruled, for their part, will have no reason to complain either

19 Cf. Trabattoni 2003.

that persuasion is not being used, or that the rulers are acting against written laws (296b–297b).

As regards laws in particular, the Stranger justifies his position against the objections of Socrates the Younger by observing that laws have an unavoidable flaw:

> [The] law could never, by determining exactly what is noblest and must just for one and all, enjoin upon them that which is best; for the differences of human beings and of actions and the fact that nothing, I may say, in human life is ever at rest, forbid any science whatsoever to promulgate any simple rule for everything and for all time. (294ab, tr. Fowler)

And immediately afterwards he adds:

> But we see that law aims at pretty nearly this very thing, like a stubborn and ignorant man who allows no one to do anything contrary to his command, or even to ask a question, not even if something new occurs to someone, which is better than the rule he has himself ordained. (294bc)

The "truly wise" ruler, instead, is immune from this flaw, as he is able to adapt this knowledge, and the prescriptions he derives from it, to the different cases that present themselves each time (here there is an evident analogy with the oral support that a good writer – according to what we read in *Phaedrus* 275e and 276e–277a – must always be able to provide to his writings). Since this is undoubtedly the best constitution, it is urgent to solve the following problem:

> Why in the world, then, is it necessary to make laws, since law is not the most perfect right? (294d)

The answer is that all the other constitutions, even if they cannot really be called 'constitutions' at all (293c–e), are approximate imitations of the perfect one. And what makes the second constitution (297e), namely that most similar to the first, an imitation of it is precisely the introduction of written laws:

> Assuming that the form of government we have described is the only right form, don't you see that the other forms must employ its written laws if they are to be preserved by doing that which is approved of nowadays, although it is not perfectly right? (297d4–7)

This necessity is evidently due to the fact that in the second constitution, which is 'second' and not 'first' exactly for this reason, no ruler in possession of

'true knowledge' can be found. Therefore in this constitution the compelling power of the law must be absolutely rigorous. While it is true that the defective nature of the written law remains in place even in the second constitution, the damage produced by the non-observance of the laws is in this case much more serious than that created by the natural weakness of the law: the laws, indeed, are here the substitute that comes closest to the control exercised by the "truly wise" ruler in the first constitution (provided, of course, that the laws were enacted on the basis of his knowledge). In other words, what in the first constitution could be nothing but a fault, since there is a ruler who knows the truth, in the second constitution becomes a virtue, because in the absence of such a ruler the non-observance of the law would cause much more serious damage than is produced by the observance of it in the perfect state (300a). It is therefore easy to understand why Plato here once again introduces the metaphor of *deuteros plous*:

> Therefore the next best course (*deuteros plous*) for those who make laws or written rules about anything whatsoever is to prohibit any violation of them whatsoever, either by one person or by a greater number. (300c1–3)

The introduction and rigorous observance of laws is thus a clear case of a 'second best', just as 'seeking refuge in *logoi*' in the *Phaedo* and 'giving up universal knowledge' in the *Philebus*. The identification of obedience to laws as what is 'best' should not make us forget that it is a '*second* best', and vice versa: the fact that obedience to laws is a *second* best should not make us forget that it is still what is a second *best*. It is essential, for Plato, that the two things be true at the same time, and not alternatively.

7 Conclusion

Based on what I have attempted to show in this chapter, the *deuteros plous* may be regarded as a privileged metaphor for understanding the basic structure of Plato's philosophy, not only as regards the *Phaedo*, *Philebus*, and *Statesman*, but also with reference to those dialogues in which it is not explicitly mentioned, such as the *Republic*, *Parmenides*, *Meno*, *Theaetetus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*, as well as the *Seventh Letter*.[20] From a metaphysical and epistemological point of view, Plato first identifies a lofty and perfect dimension, in which being is nothing less than what it should be

20 We have briefly dealt with the *Republic* and *Parmenides* here. For the other dialogues, see Trabattoni 2016, 2018, and 2020.

and the knowledge relating to it is full and complete. We can call this kind of knowledge the 'first voyage'. The metaphysical presuppositions of Plato's philosophy, on which the separation between the sensible and the intelligible realm (the so-called Two World Theory) is based, make this first voyage actually unfeasible (according to the theory of recollection, it is available only to the disembodied soul). For this reason, to avoid making philosophy contentless and ineffective on the ethical and political levels, it is necessary to find an intermediate path of enquiry which, by making use of the first voyage as a model, is able to ensure suitable philosophical knowledge for man. In both the *Phaedo* and the *Philebus* the *deuteros plous* refers to the problem of knowledge, but the points of view from which it is expounded are different. Indeed, while in the *Phaedo* the first 'unfeasible' voyage concerns the human impossibility of knowing the Forms directly, in the *Philebus* it concerns the impossibility of obtaining knowledge of equal value by means of dialectical and discursive thought. But the metaphysical assumptions are the same in both dialogues: direct knowledge can never be completely replaced by linguistic descriptions, however extensive and accurate they may be, since they will never be able to ensure an equivalent level of evidence and certainty.[21] In the *Statesman* the *deuteros plous* concerns ethical and political repercussions. On the political level, the technical and authoritarian constitution corresponds to the full and perfect knowledge of Forms, whereby rulers are entitled to make use of force; to a lower level of knowledge there corresponds, instead, the introduction of written laws and the necessity to resort to persuasion (highlighted in particular in the *Laws*, through the essential role assigned here to προοίμια).[22]

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21 The clearest explanation of this point (but certainly not the only one) is found in the so-called philosophical excursus of the *Seventh Letter*. The logos, given its discursive character, can never grasp the object in its essence, but always ends up displaying its qualities (342e–343b).

22 Cf. Trabattoni 2001.

CHAPTER 9

Life

1 The 'Last Argument'

This chapter aims to suggest some clarifications in relation to two important philosophical points concerning the last argument for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*. Let me firstly schematically sum up how I understand this proof's logical development:

1. Socrates establishes the Forms as causes of the generation, corruption, and being of sensible things (99d–102a).
2. Both a Form in itself and a form "in us", if it is a member of a pair of opposites, cannot accept the opposite contrary to itself; thus, when its opposite approaches it, it must withdraw or perish (102a–103a).
3. There is an objection raised by an anonymous interlocutor pointing out a possible inconsistency, immediately resolved by Socrates, with the first proof ("from contraries", or *antapodosis*) (103a–c).
4. There are things (e.g. fire, snow, three) that are always associated with an opposite (hot, cold, odd), and therefore are endowed with the same property ascribed to opposites in point 2 (103c–104c).
5. Definition of the things set out in point 4 and of their relationship with the Forms (105c–105d).
6. Implementation of the rules defined until now by the relationship soul-life, from which it follows that the soul is "im-mortal" (105d–3).
7. It is conceded that "immortal" means "imperishable", as in that when death approaches the soul cannot be destroyed and withdraws intact (105e–107a).

2 What Occupies What?

The first part of this chapter focuses on points 4 and 5 of the list in order to elucidate the nature of the objects Socrates is speaking about in the corresponding passages. More precisely, there is a sentence in the text in which the ambiguity of the Greek allows for two different interpretations, one of which seems to lead to the conclusion that the soul is a Form. Let us begin with a close scrutiny of the passage (104d1–3 = T1). Socrates is answering a question, raised

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by himself, about the nature of the things at issue here (among which there is the soul, i.e. the 'thing' that Socrates must show is 'immortal'). I quote here below the translations by David Gallop and Alex Long:[1]

> Would they, Cebes, be these: things that are compelled by whatever occupies them to have not only its own form, but always the form of some opposite as well? (T1g)

> 'Now, Cebes,' he said, 'would they be the following: those that, whatever they occupy, compel it not only to have their own form in each case, but also, invariably, the form of some opposite of something as well?' (T1l)

As can be easily seen, the translations are very similar except for the fact that, according to Gallop, the 'things' in question are the object of the verb 'compel', while according to Long these things are the subject. This ambiguity is made possible both by the identity, in Greek, of the nominative and the accusative neutral cases and by the normal Greek use of a singular verb when the plural subject is neutral. We have, in this sentence, the neutral plural pronoun ἅ and the neutral singular pronoun ὅτι each of which can play the role of either the subject or object of the singular verb κατάσχῃ. While Gallop takes ἅ as the object and ὅτι as the subject, Long-Sedley does the opposite.[2]

The problem seems insoluble not only on the grounds of grammatical and philological considerations, but also from the point of view of the argument's logical development. Indeed, both interpretations result in a statement that the argument assumes to be true. The core of the argument is to show that there are things of a special kind, including the soul, which not only are what they are, but are endowed with an essential character, or property, from which they can never be detached: so that they can never admit, remaining what they are, the character opposite to that which they always possess. Besides the soul, Socrates offers three further examples, according to the following schema:

> Fire – essential character – Hot
> Snow – essential character – Cold

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1 Gallop 1975 (a very careful analysis of the argument, with a lengthy discussion of the previous literature, can be found at pp. 192–222), Sedley-Long 2010. Here is the Greek: Ἆρ' οὖν, ἔφη, ὦ Κέβης, τάδε εἴη ἄν, ἃ ὅτι ἂν κατάσχῃ μὴ μόνον ἀναγκάζει τὴν αὑτοῦ ἰδέαν αὐτὸ ἴσχειν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐναντίου αὐτῷ ἀεί τινος.

2 For a discussion of the literature prior to 2010, see Trabattoni 1985 and 2011, pp. LXXV–LXXXII and notes *ad loc.* (esp. pp. 281–283).

> Three – essential character – Odd
> (Soul – essential character – Life)

It is crucial for Socrates to both explain what an essential relationship means and to point out what the appropriate means are for discovering whether and where such a relationship exists. Plato fulfils this task through a literary fiction, depicting Cebes as unable to understand Socrates' point. This misunderstanding allows Socrates (and thus Plato) to elucidate the matter. According to Sedley's interpretation of T1, Plato is suggesting that a sufficient condition for maintaining that an essential relationship exists between a thing 'S' and a character 'p' consists in showing that 'p', "whatever it occupies, compels it not only to have its own form in each case, but also, invariably, the form of some opposite of something as well". This interpretation seems to be confirmed by a passage we find later in the *Phaedo*, namely 105d3–4 (T2):

> In that case, whenever soul occupies anything, does soul always come to it bringing life?[3] (tr. Long)

The analogy between T1 and T2 is suggested firstly by the fact that the subject in T2 is the soul, namely an object that pertains to the same range of 'things' of which T1 is talking about, and secondly that the verb is in both cases the same (κατάσχῃ).

But such an analogy is seriously undermined by the sentence which immediately follows T1 (104d4–6 = T3). Since Cebes says again that he can't understand ("What do you mean?", tr. Long), Socrates repeats the very same point ("Just what we were saying a moment ago"), availing himself of an example:

> Just what we were saying a moment ago. For presumably you know that whatever the form of the three occupies, must not only be three but also be odd.[4] (T3)

In this explanation of the previous sentence, Socrates replaces the neutral subject of T1 (compatible with both ἅ and ὅτι) with a non-ambiguous singular nominative, namely "the form of three". As a result, assuming with Sedley that in T1 the subject is "the soul", the identity established between T1 and T3 (T3 is only an exemplification of T1) ends up implying that the

3 Ψυχὴ ἄρα ὅτι ἂν αὐτὴ κατάσχῃ, ἀεὶ ἥκει ἐπ' ἐκεῖνο φέρουσα ζωήν.
4 Ὥσπερ ἄρτι ἐλέγομεν. οἶσθα γὰρ δήπου ὅτι ἃ ἂν ἡ τῶν τριῶν ἰδέα κατάσχῃ, ἀνάγκη αὐτοῖς οὐ μόνον τρισὶν εἶναι ἀλλὰ καὶ περιττοῖς.

soul at issue here, i.e. the “soul” as the thing which Socrates pretends to show to be immortal, is “the Form of the soul”.

Except for a very few scholars (one must mention the almost heroic efforts made by Denis O’ Brien),[5] the vast majority of critics finds this conclusion unpalatable. The reasons for such a rejection seem, indeed, overwhelming. Firstly, in the so-called ‘affinity proof’, Socrates grounds his argument on the presupposition that the soul is *akin* to the Forms. But affinity, of course, excludes identity. Secondly, and even worse for the hypothesis here under scrutiny, if the soul were a Form, Plato would not have any need to show, through arguments, that the soul is immortal and imperishable (whereas we find several proofs in the dialogues, including not only the *Phaedo* but also the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*).

It would be tempting, then, to reject (T1l) and adopt (T1g). But in this case, we should suppose that the analogies we have detected between T1 and T2 don’t mean anything. If, indeed, the right interpretation is (T1g), then in T1 and T3 the subject concerning which Socrates says that it occupies something, compelling it to have its own property, is the Form; while in T2 it is the thing.

This is precisely the solution I want to suggest. In T1 and T3, Socrates is speaking of the action by which the form ‘F’ compels the thing it occupies not only to be ‘f’, but also to be essentially ‘p’, where ‘p’ is a property essentially associated with the form ‘F’. For instance, the form ‘Fire’ not only compels the thing it occupies to be ‘fire’, but also to be essentially ‘hot’. Instead, in T2, Socrates is clarifying the essential relationship existing between a thing ‘f’ and its property ‘p’, which the thing ‘f’ has received through its participation in form ‘F’. For instance, the thing ‘fire’ is essentially ‘hot’, through its participation in the form ‘Fire’. It is the Form of fire, indeed, that is essentially hot (we will come back to this point later). As far as the thing is concerned, its essential relationship with a certain property is instead ensured by the rules of exclusion/inclusion of opposites that the thing has inherited through its participation in the corresponding Form.

The problem with these passages is that Socrates, in order to show what it means for an entity ‘X’ to have ‘p’ as an essential property, makes use of the same exemplification, no matter if ‘X’ is a Form (T1, T3) or a thing (T2): a sufficient condition to show that an entity ‘X’, no matter whether it is a Form or a thing, has ‘p’ as its essential property is that ‘X’ compels all the things it can occupy to have the property ‘p’. In the case of the Form, the Form compels the thing occupied to have firstly its own form (cf. T1 and T3), and secondly the

5 O’Brien 1967 and 1968.

opposite one associated with it. The case of things is clearly different. In T2, indeed, the soul does not compel the thing it occupies to receive its own Form (i.e. to become a soul, or even ensouled); but compels it to be "alive". This is perfectly compatible with the Platonic idea according to which only the Forms have an essence (as they *are* essences) and that no sensible things have essential properties (and of course cannot convey these properties to other things). In T2 Socrates does not say that a thing different from the Forms (one cannot say, of course, that the soul is a sensible thing like fire or snow, but we cannot discuss this problem here; see the considerations I will put forward at the end of this section) conveys to other things something of its essence, or even some of its essential properties: the properties it assigns do not belong to its own essence (something that in Plato's world does not exist), but to the essence of the Form that occupies it, which by this occupation compels this thing to convey this property to all other things it eventually occupies in its turn.

In sum, T1 is different enough from T2 to suggest that, if we are forced to choose, the consistence between T1 and T3 should be preferred to the consistence between T1 and T2. T1s has an advantage over T1g, however, in that in this case we are not obliged to choose, as according to this interpretation all three passages would mean the same thing: in T1–3 what is at issue is only the relationships between some things and their essential properties, while no mention of Forms is made in any of them. But is this a real advantage? Was Plato's intention actually to give the same meaning to T1–3? I don't believe so. On the contrary, I think that if the reference to forms in T1–3 is missed, then the argument would be deprived of a piece that is essential for its development.

All the supporters of T1s, except for those who admit that the soul is a Form, are compelled to show the innocence of the word ἰδέα, present both in T1 and (especially) in T3. The main point of this strategy is of course to argue that in T1 and T3, the word in question does not refer to the Platonic Form. This common framework has been nuanced by commentators in different ways. Centrone, for instance, thinks that here Plato is speaking about the immanent forms, or the "Forms in us" mentioned in the dialogue at 102d7.[6] Dixsaut translates the word at 104d6 with a paraphrase intended to avoid any reference to Forms: "the character of being three".[7] Sedley instead calls into play the fact that in Plato, as is well-known, words such as εἶδος or ἰδέα do not have the technical meaning of Form in the majority of cases. But let us quote Sedley's own words:

6 Centrone 2000, n. 166, p. 230.

7 Dixsaut 1991.

> The natural solution … is to take idea as meaning, not a transcendent Form, but a "character" in a metaphysically less restricted sense. This suggestion is borne out by the fact that idea has nowhere hitherto in the *Phaedo* or in any dialogue likely to predate it been used as a term for a transcendent Form. Its use in that sense is in fact unexpectedly rare in Plato.[8]

All this is undoubtedly true. But it is equally true that, in Plato, ἰδέα is one of the words he uses to denote the Form. And the fact that, prior to the passage at issue, this meaning is not attested in Plato's work doesn't mean anything, because on the one hand Plato has to start somewhere, and on the other the seminal nature of the *Phaedo* in relation to the construction of Plato's metaphysics ensures that this dialogue is a most appropriate place to commence such undertaking.

In any event, these are secondary considerations. What matters most is that there are very good reasons to suppose that, as I am going to show, the argument implies presence of Forms precisely in the passages in which Sedley *et al.* think that they are absent. At 102 a–b, Socrates sums up the premise on which the interlocutors reached an agreement at the end of the first part of the argument, namely that "each of the Forms was something, and that the other things, partaking in them, took the name of the forms themselves" (here and later I quote Gallop's translation). Then he goes on by specifying that both the Form itself (αὐτὸ τὸ μέγεθος, "largeness itself", 102d6) and the form "in us" (ἐν ἡμῖν) share the same property of not admitting, in remaining what they are, the property opposed to his own (for instance, largeness – both largeness in itself and the largeness in us – never admits the small). Here, the mention of the "largeness in us" does not have the metaphysical aim of introducing an intermediate entity between Forms and sensible things. The reason for this insertion is in fact strictly functional to the argument's successful conclusion. Socrates shall demonstrate that the essential relationships which, strictly speaking, pertain only to Forms are inherited by the corresponding particular things via participation in them. In order to achieve this result, it is necessary to show that the Forms are active, and thus in some way 'present', within sensible things ("in us").

The next section of the argument deserves to be carefully scrutinised in order to avoid misunderstandings. Socrates introduces some pairs of opposite Forms, like hot/cold and even/odd. He states not only that these

8 Sedley 2018, p. 213.

Forms do not admit their opposite, but that this rule also applies to some other things which, though being things and not Forms, always entail a certain opposite (and thus do not admit the opposite contrary to it).

The misunderstandings arise from the premise according to which the opposite forms (hot/cold, odd/even etc.) are the only Forms the argument needs, but I think this is wrong. To understand why, let me advance the following considerations. Socrates has assumed that the thing 'fire' is essentially hot, though it is not the Form of hot. There must exist, as a consequence, a special relation between the fire and the Form of hot so that the rule that applies to the Form of hot also applies to the immanent form (the form "in us"). In other words, within fire the immanent form of hot must be present. This seems possible, in Platonic terms, only by supposing that fire participates in some way in the Form of hot. But this conclusion seems rather strange. It is not strange, of course, that a thing participates in a plurality of Forms. But the participation here at issue, namely the participation of fire in the Form of hot, is a very special case, since it is an essential and not accidental participation. The 'normal' functioning of participation should imply, in fact, that a thing 'x' participates in an essential way only in the eponymous Form 'X' and participates in an accidental way in all the other Forms. But how could it be possible, then, for 'fire' to participate in the Form of hot in an essential way?

It is precisely in order to answer this question that Socrates introduces T1. T1 and T3 are not, in fact, a further exposition of what Socrates has already stated, i.e. that there are objects essentially linked with a certain property; rather, it presents a new point, though obviously connected with what precedes it. Thus far, Socrates has done nothing more than stating a fact. Only now, and not before, does he raise the question of why and how. This enquiry is shaped in his customary form of 'a' what-is-question":

> Then would you like us, if we can, to define what kinds these are?

By posing the question of defining the kind of things he has been speaking about thus far, Socrates is going to precisely clarify the special essential relationship which these things are involved in. Moreover, Plato's aim is to explain this special kind of relationship according to the normal rules of participation. The answer, which we already know, compels Socrates to introduce a further kind of Form besides the Forms of opposites. There is no need to assume the existence – between things like fire and Forms like hot – of a special (and so hardly explainable) type of participation. Fire participates in an essential way, as is normal, only in the form 'Fire'. Thus, if it is true that fire is not only necessarily 'fire' (via participation in the form 'Fire') but also necessarily hot, the

reason is not any essential/direct participation in the Form of hot but the necessary connection between the Form of fire and the Form of hot. The fact that fire is essentially hot must depend, in a way to be specified, upon the only essential property that we are allowed to ascribe to fire – namely, being "fire". T3 (which after all is merely a repetition of T1 equipped with an example) has precisely the function of specifying this.

> Whatever the form of three occupies (i.e. a sensible triad), must not only be three but also be odd.

It is the eponymous Form, then, that gives things the essential properties they are found to have: the eponymous essential property is given directly, through participation; the other eventual essential properties are given indirectly, through the essential relationships the eponymous Form maintains with other Forms.[9] The thing inherits these optional (but essential!) properties at the same time as it receives the necessary eponymous property. If only the Form of hot can ultimately be responsible for the fact that fire is hot, as Socrates has stated in the first part of the argument, T1 and T3 go on to explain how this can happen: the Form of hot does not act directly upon fire, but indirectly through the Form of fire, since this Form is essentially hot. Without the mediation of the form of Fire, the Form of hot would confer upon fire the property of being hot only in an accidental way, as happens in the case of a thing that can either be large or small via participation in the corresponding Forms (provided that there is no essential connection between its own Form and the Forms of largeness and smallness).

The subsequent development of the argument confirms that this is the correct interpretation. Once the Forms of fire, snow, and three (or five) have been introduced, Socrates goes on to show that these Forms, though not being themselves members of a pair of opposites, are essentially linked to a certain opposite. For instance, the Form of three, though not being the Form of odd and therefore not having the Form of even as its opposite, is essentially odd, and therefore is *anartios* (104e5), i.e. "necessarily not-even". Plato's very careful choice of words in this passage is noteworthy:

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9 In this regard, I deem the following formula suggested by G. Vlastos to be correct: "x is F because, being G, it must participate in Γ; and since Γ entails Φ, x must also participate in Φ, and hence x most b F" (Vlastos 1969, pp. 317–18). For instance, a particular fire (x) is hot (F) because, being fire (G), it must participate in the Form of Fire (Γ); and since the Form of Fire (Γ) entails the Form of Hot (Φ), the particular fire (x) must also participate (the verb "must" show that it is an essential participation) in the Form of Hot (Φ), and hence the particular fire (x) must be hot (F).

– So that the form (ἰδέα) of even will never come to three (τὰ τρία).
– No, it won't.
– Three (τὰ τρία), then, has no part in the even.
– No part.
– So threeness (ἡ τριάς) is uneven (*anartios* ἀνάρτιος) (104e1–5, tr. Gallop, modified).

We ascertain, as a matter of fact, that a thing called 'three', which is a thing composed of three elements (Plato points out that he is here speaking of a thing by writing τὰ τρία) can never partake of the even (second proposition). From this evidence it follows, again as a matter of fact, that the Form of even can never occupy a thing like the three (again τὰ τρία : first proposition). This evidence allows us to state the following rule: the form of three (Plato points out that he is speaking of the form by using ἡ τριάς) is uneven (ἀνάρτιος), i.e. the Form of three has an essential relationship with the form of odd.[10] Conversely, from this rule we can derive that the Form of three, whatever it manages to occupy, compels it not only to be 'three', but also to be odd. Then Socrates goes on to provide further examples for his argument, while admitting their redundancy (105a6–7).

We find in this exposition another point that could again generate (as it actually did) the incorrect hypothesis that Socrates is not ascribing the essential properties to Forms here, but to things. In describing the essential relationship between a Form (e.g. the Form of fire) and a certain opposite Form (e.g., the Form of hot), Socrates says that the Form of fire "brings out (ἐπιφέρει) the opposite of cold" (104e6). This possible misunderstanding is due to the fact that in T2, whereas we know that the subject is the thing (ψυχὴ) and not the Form, the verb is once again the same: ἐπ΄ἐκεῖνο φέρουσα ζωήν ("bringing life to it"). But now, after scrutinising the structure of the argument carried out so far, we are able to appreciate more clearly the difference between T1 and T3, on the one hand, and T2 on the other. Shortly above in the text, precisely at line 105b1, Socrates has introduced a break in the development of his

10 I was convinced for a long time that Plato here uses the expressions τὰ δύο, τὰ τρία and, ἡ δυάς, ἡ τριάς, interchangeably, no matter whether he is speaking of things or of Forms (Cf. Trabattoni 1985, p. 137, and 2011, p. 219, n. 225). But I realised later that this is not entirely true. Plato does not make a distinction, as it is quite normal, when Socrates is talking of properties that apply interchangeably both to things and Forms: (1) not having an opposite (e.g. 104c5, where Plato uses δυάς and τριάς); and (2) always having with them a certain opposite (e.g. 104a3 b4, where we find τριάς at line a4 and τὰ δύο at line b2). But when Socrates focuses on the relationship between things and Forms, as in the passage quoted here (this is clearly shown by line 104e1: Ἐπὶ τὰ τρία ἄρα ἡ τοῦ ἀρτίου ἰδέα οὐδέποτε ἥξει.), τὰ τρία means the thing, and ἡ τριάς means the Form.

argument, well-marked by the initial formula “Then please repeat it from the start” (Πάλιν δή μοι, ἔφη, ἐξ ἀρχῆς λέγε). This break points out that Socrates is now shifting from Forms to things, in order to complete his argument (whose subject is of course the thing and not the Form).

As far as the analogy between T1/T3 and T2 is concerned, I can only repeat what I have already said. Plato is here attempting to grasp and explain the notion of essence, or an essential relationship (and this is of some philosophical interest, I think). To do that, he says that an entity ‘X’ has an essential relationship with a property ‘y’, when, as a matter of fact, the thing ‘X’ always brings (ἐπιφέρει) with it the property ‘y’, and therefore bestows this property upon all the things it occupies (κατάσχῃ). The fact that this criterion applies regardless of the quality of the subjects involved (no matter if they are Forms or things) is to be expected, provided that the notion of essence, or essential relationship, is one and the same in all cases. The only caveat is that the essential relationship must ultimately depend upon the Forms.

It is therefore easy to understand why Plato deems it necessary to introduce into the argument, besides the Forms of opposites, also the Forms of fire, snow, three, and soul. The fact that fire is hot is evident from experience, but the experience cannot explain why fire is *essentially* hot. If fire is essentially hot, then it must depend upon the essence of fire. But in Plato’s philosophy, the essence of fire is nothing other than the form of Fire. Therefore, without bringing into play the participation of fire, snow, three, and soul in their corresponding Forms, Plato cannot explain why fire is essentially hot, snow is essentially cold, three is essentially odd, and (what matters most) why the soul is essentially alive. We can fully realise the importance of this point by considering that if it is obvious to assume that fire can never be something other than fire, it is not equally obvious to assume that fire can never be cold. To ensure the truth of such a conclusion, Plato cannot of course refer to experience; he must, instead, refer only to Forms. He achieves such a result by calling upon the rules of inclusion/exclusion inherent to Forms of opposites (exemplified by the Forms of hot/cold, odd/even) on one hand, and on the other the essential relationship existing between each thing and its own Forms (exemplified by the forms of fire, snow, three, and soul).

Now the problem of the Form of the soul remains, the existence of which not all scholars are willing to accept. Karfík 2018 is revealing in this regard. He readily admits that in the section of the *Phaedo* at issue here, the Forms of snow, fire, and numbers are actually present, but he does not mention the Form of the soul. But since fire, snow, and numbers are only examples introduced in the argument to clarify the case of the soul by analogy, it would be meaningless to suppose that there are Forms of fire, snow, and numbers, but

not of the soul. As far as I am concerned, there is no problem in admitting the existence of such a Form.[11] Since the soul is not itself a Form, not only is it the case that nothing prevents it from having a Form, but it would be difficult to justify the soul not having one.

It could perhaps be added that this hypothesis finds some support in the *Timaeus*, considering firstly that the demiurge creates the soul, and secondly that this creation, too, according to the way in which the demiurge operates, should require a model. But I have no great confidence in such arguments: I think that the method of drawing general conclusions about Plato's 'theories' by comparing the dialogues should be employed only with the utmost caution, as Plato's method of composing his writings does not suggest that such consistency was foremost in his intentions.[12] For the same reason, I don't believe that we can get rid of the problem by looking in Plato's dialogues for a theory that consistently distinguishes the entities for which there are Forms from the entities for which there are not. Even if we admit that Plato had such a theory, what seems certain to me is that in the *Phaedo* Plato introduces the Forms as a means of demonstrating that the soul is immortal – not with the goal of building a 'theory of Forms'; any more than the reference to the Form of shuttle in the *Cratylus* or to the Form of bed in the *Republic* should be considered substantial components of the 'theory of Forms'.

3 Immortal and Indestructible

The second problem I am going to deal with is in point 7 of the summary sketched at the beginning of this chapter. According to a widespread opinion dating back to Strato of Lampsachus, Socrates is simply begging the question: the long, hard labour he carries out to show that the soul is 'im-mortal' (namely 'incapable of death') seems to only be intended to mislead the reader, by persuading him that this is what matters, when in fact the most important and more difficult point is to show that the soul is not only immortal, but also 'imperishable'. But when Socrates comes to this crucial passage, he addresses it by posing a rhetorical question (to which Cebes immediately answers in the affirmative) where 'immortal' and 'imperishable' are hastily assimilated, without any further analysis.

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11 Cf. *Phaedr*. 246a.

12 See Introduction, p. 5.

David Sedley, in the paper already quoted in the first part of this chapter, has recently challenged the traditional interpretation.[13] Proceeding from the view that Plato would hardly have based his account of Socrates' last philosophical message, namely his "confident acceptance of death … on a faulty argument", he argues that "it is as good an argument for that conclusion as can be found in the Platonic corpus, and that its supposed incoherences have been exaggerated".

As far I can understand, Sedley's 'reinterpretation' is based on two grounds:

1) He admits that immortal (*athatanos*) and imperishable (*anolethros*) represent, as far as Socrates' answer is concerned, two different points. According to him, from 105e2 (that is, immediately after Socrates has proved that the soul is 'im-mortal') a "stage 2 in the argument" commences that continues until 107a1. But in this second stage, Socrates' aim "has nothing to do with proving the soul immortal". Its purpose is rather "to establish the further vital conclusion that the soul, when death approaches, must 'retreat', that is, *leave the body and go to Hades*". (Sedley 2018, p. 217)

2) The traditional interpretation is founded on the hypothesis that there are two kinds of death for the soul: the first is the death that Socrates demonstrates the soul can't suffer once it has been proven that it is immortal (let me refrain from specifying what this means, for the moment); the second is simply the destruction or annihilation of the soul. According to Sedley, however, this distinction is unjustified, as "for a living thing to perish entails its dying", and "a soul that ceased to exist would *ipso facto* become dead" (p. 219).

Let us begin from the first point. It is hard to see how the demonstration that the soul is imperishable could have any connection with what it does after leaving the body. Even admitting that the argument has successfully proved that the soul is imperishable – and this is difficult enough – there is no rational way to discover where the soul goes after leaving the body: the simple fact that the soul is imperishable does not of course entail any further information about its destination. In short, I can't see any connection between the indestructibility of the soul and Hades. On the other hand, the reason why Socrates mentions Hades, both here and in many other of the dialogue's passages (58e, 68a, 68b, 69c, 70c, 71e, 80d, 84d) seems to me quite clear. Through this example, Plato achieves the result according to the way he often chooses to present his thought to his contemporaries: namely, by inserting his rather innovative theories into a context that is familiar to his public, and in so doing rendering them more acceptable. If common opinion maintains that "our souls go to Hades", Plato

13 For the "critical" interpretation of the argument, see Dorter 2001, pp. 406–407 and n. 1.

does not presume to say anything to the contrary.[14] What he does not say (or, if anything, limits himself to hinting at) is that whereas the common view is that Hades is the Homeric realm of death, and is called Hades because the human beings who go there become invisible, for him Hades is the realm of those elements which are inherently invisible, namely the realm of Forms. But, of course, common people do not know what 'invisible' really means, any more than they know what death means when they say that the philosopher looks like a 'dying person' (64a–c).

As far as the second point is concerned, it could be objected that the difference between the two kinds of death is implied both in the logic and in the argument's text. It is true that, for a living thing, we can say that 'ceasing to exist' is equivalent to saying that it 'becomes dead'. However, there is a clear difference between 'to be dead, in the sense of ceasing to exist' and 'to be dead, in the sense of being a dead thing'. This difference is actually articulated by Sedley himself when he points out the difference between the utterances "Plato's soul has died" and "Plato's soul is (…) a dead soul" (p. 219). The difference is precisely that in the first case, the death of Plato's soul means that is has ceased to exist, whereas in the second Plato's soul, though it has died, nevertheless continues to exist as a 'dead soul'. According to Sedley, the two sentences just quoted belong to a model (model 2) that is "the most promising way to undermine Plato's defense of immortality". In Sedley's opinion there is, however, there is a model 1 that is exempt from this criticism, whose neutralisation "could in itself prove a demanding task". Here is the model:

– Plato was a philosopher
– Plato has died
– Plato is in perpetuity dead
– Plato is in perpetuity a dead philosopher (Sedley 2018, p. 219).

Sedley is undoubtedly right in claiming that whereas the sentence "Plato's soul is in perpetuity a dead soul" is clearly false, the sentence "Plato is in perpetuity a dead philosopher" is true. But this does not mean, of course, that Plato actually survived, and it is hard to understand how such a 'truth' could support Socrates' confidence in the face of death.

14 It is worth noting the perfect analogy between the conclusion of the *antapodosis* in 71e1 (Εἰσὶν ἄρα, ἔφη, αἱ ψυχαὶ ἡμῶν ἐν Ἅιδου) and the conclusion of the last argument in 107a1 (τῷ ὄντι ἔσονται ἡμῶν αἱ ψυχαὶ ἐν Ἅιδου). It is clear that Socrates adopts the same line of argument in both cases: there is therefore nothing to support Sedley's hypothesis according to which the reference to Hades has a special function belonging only to the latter.

Anyway, I think that we have no need to enter into these speculative and abstract considerations. The difference between the two species of death is assumed by Cebes himself when he expounds his objection. According to Sedley, there is no reason to think that ἀνώλεθρον (indestructible) "represent(s) a distinct probandum from ἀθάνατον (immortal)" (p. 217, n. 17). But this seems untrue on linguistic grounds, first of all. Sedley quotes Cebes' expression at 88b5–6, in which he demands that the soul should be proved παντάπασιν ἀθάνατον τε καὶ ἀνώλεθρον. But whereas *τέ* or *καί* taken individually means a simple conjunction ('s' *and* 'p') *τε καί* taken together mean, if not correspondence in the strict sense (*both* 's' and 'p'),[15] at least an addition ('s' *and also* 'p'). Moreover, the same idea of 'addition' is conveyed by the adverb παντάπασιν (absolutely). What Cebes suggests to Socrates is that the soul should be proven *not only* immortal, but *absolutely* immortal, namely immortal *and also* indestructible (ἀνώλεθρον).

A few lines above, Cebes has indeed explicitly introduced the distinction to which he is now referring. According to the objector, though it is possible that some souls survive death many times, nothing prevents the possibility that the soul "ends by perishing completely in one of its deaths" (88a9–10). Here the difference is clearly established, as we can see, between the first kind of death, which the soul can survive many times without being destroyed, and the second, which involves its own destruction. The first kind of death is, judging from all evidence, the detachment of the soul from the body (according to Socrates' definition of death in 64c).[16] Cebes thus admits that death understood in this way does not necessarily destroy the soul, but he additionally demands a proof showing that this destruction can never happen.

Now let us try to understand whether, and to what extent, Socrates' demonstration that the soul is im-mortal fulfils Cebes' request. Socrates' argument succeeds in proving that it can never be that at a certain point there exists something like a 'dead soul'. In contrast to what happens to the body, which at the moment of its separation from the soul becomes a 'dead body' (i.e. a corpse), the soul must perish or withdraw. But if this is so, Socrates has managed to show only that the soul is immortal; he still has to prove that it is indestructible

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15 "τε, like καί, is used both as a simple connective and as a preparatory particle in corresponsion, τε…τε, τε…και." (Denniston 1954, p. 497).

16 Death is here defined as "separation of the soul from the body" (τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος ἀπαλλαγήν, 64c4–5).

as well.[17] Since, as we have already seen, Cebes' request was for proof that the soul is not only immortal but also indestructible, no answer to this question has been put forward until now. The decisive step, then, can be found in the transition from *athanaton* to *anolethron*. And as this transition does not seem to contain arguments, but only Cebes' unjustified assent, it would be easy to conclude that Socrates is simply begging the question.

My first remark is that, if what I have just outlined is actually the case, it is all but surprising. As commentators have noted for a long time now, given that Socrates' final argument has an 'ontological' structure (in the sense of Anselm's so-called 'ontological' proof for the existence of God),[18] and since a long and important tradition from Roscellinus to Kant has shown that ontological arguments are logically inconsistent, there is no reason why Socrates' arguments should be an exception. But are we sure that logic provides the right point of view to appreciate the argument at issue?

As we have seen, Sedley fears that if Socrates' argument proves to be faulty, his lofty philosophical message would be compromised. But I don't think he is right about this. In my opinion, he would only be correct only on the grounds of two additional premises:

1. For Plato, there is a clear-cut distinction between true assertions based on sound arguments, and false assertions based on faulty arguments;
2. Socrates' attitude towards death can be philosophically justified only by supposing that he accepts some propositions that have been proven to be true through logical, sound arguments.

However, I think that both premises are untenable. As far as the first one is concerned, namely the fact that contemplating such difficult problems as the immortality of the soul requires one to settle for less than unquestionable arguments, it is affirmed by Simmias at 85b–e64a1, and accepted by Socrates (85e1–2).[19] As far as Socrates himself is concerned, he never says in the dialogue that he *knows* that the soul is immortal, nor that he has somehow proved that it is so. On the contrary, he frankly admits that he could be wrong (91b). He claims to have only a "good hope" regarding the immortality of the soul (64a1, 65c5), and does not deny, at the end of the final argument, that further doubts

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17 According to D. O'Brien (1997, pp. 49–33, 53–54), Socrates does not need this further demonstration, as Cebes only claimed that the soul should be proven capable of surviving its detachment from the body, not that it should be proven absolutely indestructible. But Dixsaut 2001 (pp. 387–380) is right in replying that Cebes' objection, as I have argued myself, does not allow for this interpretation. Cf. Trabattoni 2011, pp. 229–230, n. 235.

18 Cf. Dixsaut 1991, p. 401.

19 See ch. 8, pp. 151–152.

are fully justified (even if Simmias and Cebes have nothing to add at the time)[20] and that the problem deserves further investigation.[21]

Only now, once logical considerations are put aside, are we able to appreciate the weight of the *Phaedo*'s final argument. Since Socrates restricts himself to raising a question, thus leaving open the possibility that the argument carried on until now is inadequate ("if it's granted us that soul must also be imperishable, then soul, besides being deathless, would also be imperishable; but if not, another argument would be needed", 106a9–d1), if there is something relevant for the transition from 'immortal' to 'imperishable', it must be found in Cebes' answer (or even in Socrates' further remarks, as we will see). This is what Cebes says:

> But there's no need of one, on that score at least. Because it could hardly be that anything else wouldn't admit destruction if the immortal, being everlasting, is going to admit destruction. (106d2–4)

We can overlook the insertion of the new term 'everlasting', since it doesn't matter if we read the Greek as "being everlasting" or "and everlasting".[22] Since everlasting (ἀίδιον) is synonymous with 'imperishable' (the negative and positive forms are complementary), saying that the soul is everlasting does not make any progress towards turning 'immortal' into 'imperishable'. More interesting is the assumption implied in Cebes' answer that, in order to achieve this result, something must exist that does not admit destruction. If we add to this assumption two further premises granted by Socrates' interlocutors during the

20 107a–b.

21 I cannot therefore agree with D. Sedley (1995, p. 17), who "cannot imagine that Plato did not consider the very last argument with which he credited Socrates to be a cogent one". This thesis is related to the contrast – established by Sedley – between the view that Simmias expresses in 85b–e and the one adopted by Socrates (pp. 18–21). In this regard, Sedley advances three arguments: (1) Unlike Simmias, Socrates deems the demonstration to be cogent; (2) Simmias, in the above-quoted passage, combines a (rational) Socratic perspective with a (religious) Pythagorean one that can be traced back to Philolaus, but which is foreign to Socrates; (3) Socrates' perfect composure when drinking the cup of hemlock proves his complete faith in the immortality of the soul. With regard to (1), the observations just made (with reference to 64a, 65c, 91b, 107a–b) should suffice. As regards (2), Simmias actually denies that any revelation can take place and in this respect he does not differ from Socrates. Finally, as far as (3) is concerned, Socrates' composure does not depend on any certainty, but on the fact that he has used reason to establish which choice is most likely to be right, taking account of what is possible for him. Indeed, Socrates displays the same composure in the *Apology*, where – as is widely known – the immortality of the soul is only presented as an hypothesis.

22 See the discussion of this point in Ogihara 2018, pp. 201 and 204.

dialogue, we can weigh up the abundance of presuppositions that hide behind Cebes' (apparently) hurried assent:

1. there is a thing, namely the soul, immaterial and different in quality from body and matter;
2. this thing can survive its separation from the body (the premise granted by Cebes);
3. there are one or more things that are indestructible.

But even more interesting is Socrates' commentary on Cebes' answer. This passage, which was overlooked for a long time, has recently attracted the attention of commentators in terms of being an essential step for understanding the final part of the argument.[23] But I think that its meaning has not yet been entirely clarified. Let me first quote the text:

> 'Well God anyway,' said Socrates, 'and the form of life itself, and anything else immortal there may be, never perish, as would, I think, be agreed by everyone'. (106d–7)

The key for understanding this text is Socrates' very last words, when he supposes that everyone "would agree". In this way, Plato clearly shows that he is not attempting to prove that the soul is immortal from a general point of view and through abstract logical means. Rather, his aim is to persuade people that the soul is immortal on the basis of the beliefs they already have and of the assumptions they explicitly grant. Socrates' 'arguments', and not only in the *Phaedo*, are much more a matter of the 'rational' persuasion of specific interlocutors than of logical demonstrations of some 'truths' valid for all.[24]

The statement which must be proved is that what never dies, in therefore having an essential relationship with life, is 'imperishable'. Instead of looking for some logical device, Socrates seems satisfied with mentioning some entities for which the connection here at issue is commonly acknowledged, so that the extension of this connection to the soul should be admitted by analogy. In other words, Socrates is here arguing on the grounds of people's beliefs, not of the laws of logic. This is particularly clear as regards the first example, namely the gods. Socrates' point is to persuade people who are already convinced that the gods – which are immortal by definition – are 'imperishable', that they must extend this argument to the soul given that the soul, no less than the gods, is immortal in an essential way. The goal of this example, then, is clearly

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23 Cf. D. Frede 1978, pp. 31–32; Dixsaut 2001, p. 399; Pakaluk 2010, pp. 669–674; Karfík 2018, p. 185; Ogihara 2018, p. 200.

24 See. ch. 6, pp. 123–124.

the persuasion of common people, the same for whose benefit Socrates introduced the metaphor of Hades.

The second example, the Form of life, is instead aimed more at philosophically educated people. According to Karfík, Plato here hints at the participation in life, soul, and *phronesis* that he ascribes to the "perfect being" in *Soph.* 248e–249a (pp. 186–187).[25] But this passage refers to the perfect being in general, whereas in the *Phaedo* Socrates mentions only the Form *of life*. Thus Socrates here is not speaking of the *life of Forms* (whatever that could mean), but of the *life of the Form of life*. Ogihara thinks that the Form to which Socrates is referring should be the "form in us", because "it has been assumed that only what is presently alive can be immortal".[26] But in fact the "form in us", insofar as it is a 'form', is no more or less 'alive' than "the Form itself". I think it's better therefore to bring in 'self-predication'. Leaving aside any further remark,[27] the basic meaning of self-predication can be summarised as the following rule: only the form of 'X' can be properly said 'x', as it can never be 'non-x' in any respect, both diachronic 'x' can't become 'non-x' in the course of time) and synchronic 'x' cannot appear 'not x' in any respect).[28]

Provided that a thing exists named 'soul', which is an immaterial entity separable from the body the presence of which in the human being is responsible for its being alive, it is possible to show through logical arguments that this thing is immortal, in the sense that it can never suffer death. Lines 105e8–9 shows that Socrates held this proposition to be proven:

> – Very well. May we say that this much has been proved ἀποδεδεῖχθαι? Or how does it seem to you?'
> – Yes, and very adequately proved, Socrates.'

Logic, whose aim is *demonstration*, goes as far as this point: namely to *demonstrate* the absolute necessity that a thing provided with the properties that the interlocutors of the *Phaedo* ascribe to the soul is actually im-mortal. But this result is not of great use unless it can be proved that the immortal is

25 Karfík 2018, pp. 186–187.
26 Ogihara 2018, p. 200.
27 I expounded my interpretation of this topic in Trabattoni 2016, pp. 252–260.
28 According to a formula Plato repeats many times with slight differences (*Phaed.* 79d, *Resp.* 479a, 479e, *Soph.* 248a, *Pol.* 269d, *Phil* 59c, 61e), the Forms are what ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὡσαύτως ἔχει (*Phaed.* 79d), where ἀεὶ means the diachronic invariance (the Form is at all times identical to itself) and κατὰ ταὐτὰ the synchronic one (a Form cannot be or appear different depending on its different relationships with the observer and/or the other things). Cf. ch. 1, p. 20 and n. 16.

imperishable as well. The decisive step, then, still needs to be carried out. But to accomplish it, logic is put aside as irrelevant and replaced by analogy and *ad hominem* arguments. By invoking the presuppositions granted by both philosophers and non-philosophers, Socrates has evidently *not* proved that the statement "the immortal is imperishable" *is in general true*; but he has proved that nobody can have good reasons for *not being persuaded of that*.

In this way, we reach an apparently singular conclusion: logic has the power to discover, through demonstration, true propositions. But these propositions, if taken in themselves and without any addition, are pointless. What really matters can instead be provided only by the decisive addition of a set of assumptions and considerations whose truth or falsity is undetectable by logic. This outcome, in fact, isn't strange at all as far as Plato's Socrates is concerned: it is simply his normal way of reasoning and arguing.[29]

It would be wrong to argue, however, that Plato's arguments are only a matter of rhetoric. As some commentators have rightly pointed out (cf. n. 74), the identity between immortal and everlasting/imperishable is strengthened by further philosophical considerations, both within the *Phaedo* and elsewhere. The general indestructibility of life lies at the core of the so-called *antapodosis* in the *Phaedo*; the necessity for an everlasting entity like the soul as the sufficient cause of the continuity and eternity of motion is stressed both in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Laws*; while in the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger also shows that the soul is made of the same stuff as the gods (hence the relevance of Socrates' reference to god in *Phaedo* 106d5). What must be strongly emphasised is the caveat of not asking logic for what it is unable to give.[30]

4 Conclusion

The analysis carried out in this chapter allows me to draw some concluding remarks, which in a way could be extended to the book as a whole. Plato is

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29 Cf. Gonzalez 1998, pp. 206–208.

30 See Pakaluk 2010. According to him the "ultimate final argument" (106c9–107a1) is a "cosmological" proof (no less than the first one, the so-called *antapodosis*, on which see Pakaluk 2003), inasmuch as it "involves identifying the human soul within a class of immortal stuff and the arguing that immortal stuff, considered as a class, cannot perish" (p. 673). Though I regard this as correct, I think that Pakaluk's position should be nuanced. On the one hand, it remains true that the final argument is more a matter of (essential) predication than of cosmological pictures. On the other hand, I think that here Plato is more concerned with 'persuading', through references to popular views, than with building an argument that is sound in its own right.

a philosopher who especially, or at least mostly, engages in arguments. The interpretative method adopted by those who identify the main aim of exegesis as the plausible reconstruction of his arguments thus strikes me not merely as appropriate, but as perfectly natural and indeed justified by the nature of Plato's philosophy. Consequently, critical approaches seeking to trace all or part of Plato's work back to the fields of literature and rhetoric have always seemed reductive to me. Consistently with this assumption, I have primarily set myself the task of ascertaining the nature and structure of Plato's arguments, as far as this is possible. Having said this, I should add at least two caveats. First of all, Plato's 'arguments' are always influenced by a variety of factors that largely (yet not exclusively) depend on the very form of his writings (i.e. dialogue) and on the intrinsic features of this literary genre (which Plato, of course, did not choose at random).[31] In my view, the choice of the dialogue form reflects the fact that Plato's main aim as a philosopher is to educate and persuade. As we read in a famous passage from the *Phaedrus*, the natural power or capacity of *logos* lies in its ability to guide the soul.[32] This also means that *logos* is the main, if not only, tool that human beings can resort to in order to achieve the objectives of philosophy (which, according to Plato, ultimately coincide with the objectives of human life). However – and here I come to my second caveat – this tool is not strong enough in itself to direct human beings' life choices through the power of argumentation. In other words, Plato presents us with a philosophy in which reason, on the one hand, is the only reliable tool at our disposal but, on the other, is not a sufficient means to solve life's greatest problems once and for all. What we have, then, to keep to the *Phaedo*, is a philosophy that 'demonstrates' – by all means possible for it – that death is not an evil, that suicide is forbidden, that philosophical virtue ensures happiness to a far greater extent than any other mode of conduct, that the soul cannot be reduced to a fragile quality of the body, that the existence of a supra-sensible realm is the most plausible conclusion we can infer from the analysis of experience, and that life stands out from transient material things thanks to the specific peculiarities of its essence. And yet, none of the arguments adduced in support of these theses is sufficient to engender certainty in man and thus to release him from disquietude. I will go so far as to argue that it is perhaps in this coexistence of two apparently antithetical planes that the secret of the centuries-old vitality of Plato's philosophy lies.

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31 Cf. Trabattoni 2012.

32 λόγου δύναμις τυγχάνει ψυχαγωγία οὖσα.

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